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BAD FACTS: MAKING LEMONADE FROM LEMONS

Quentin Brogdon

Author contact information:
Quentin Brogdon
Cra in Brogdon Rogers, LLP
3400 Carlisle Street, Suite 200
Dallas, Texas 75204

Qbrogdon@cbra wfirm.com
214-598-1009 Cell
214-613-5101 Fax

QUENTIN BROGDON

Crain Brogdon Rogers, Dallas, Texas
214.598.1009, Qbrogdon@cbrlawfirm.com

Education

B.A. - Rice University
J.D. & M.B.A. with honors – University of Houston (Assoc. Editor, *Hous. Law Review*)

Board Certifications

Personal Injury - Texas Board of Legal Specialization
Civil Trial - National Board of Trial Advocacy

Honors and Professional Affiliations

International Academy of Trial Lawyers - Fellow
American College of Trial Lawyers - Fellow
International Society of Barristers - Fellow
The Best Lawyers in America - Personal Injury Litigation 2014-Present
Texas Monthly Super Lawyer - 2003-Present (Top 100 Super Lawyers in Texas 2013-Present)
Lawdragon Magazine - 500 Leading Plaintiffs' Lawyers 2007; 500 Leading Plaintiffs' Consumer Lawyers 2019, 2020
D Magazine - Best Lawyers in Dallas 2014-Present
Texas Trial Lawyers Association – President 2022
American Board of Trial Advocates, Dallas Chapter - President (2017) & National Executive Committee Member (2022)
Dallas Trial Lawyers Association - President 2007-2008
Association of Plaintiff Interstate Trucking Lawyers of America – President 2018
AV-Rated Preeminent - Martindale-Hubbell
Standing Ovation Award - State Bar of Texas CLE Program
Thurgood Marshall "Fighting For Justice" Award - Association of Plaintiff Interstate Trucking Lawyers
State Bar of Texas Pattern Jury Charge Committee - Business, Consumer & Employment 2007-2009

Publications

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DEALING WITH BAD FACTS: MAKING LEMONADE OUT OF LEMONS

Quentin Brogdon

“You’ll have to look for another lawyer to handle the case, because the whole time I was up there talking to the jury, I’d be thinking, Lincoln, you’re a liar!’ and I just might forget myself and say it out loud.”

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
to a prospective client

I. INTRODUCTION

On a daily basis in courtrooms across the state, trial lawyers face tough strategic choices concerning bad facts in their cases. Every case has bad facts, to a greater or lesser degree, and the opponent *always* has points to make. There may be damaging admissions, prior inconsistent statements, violations of policies and procedures, facts supporting contributory negligence, prior injuries, delays in treatment, criminal records or other bad facts that come into evidence.

The first line of defense is the filing of a motion in limine. Assuming that fails or that there is no legitimate argument to support the exclusion of the bad evidence, what is the best way to deal with the evidence? When is the optimal time to deal with the bad evidence? Is it best to deal with the bad evidence only after the opponent introduces it, or is it better to “inoculate” the jury against the bad effects of the evidence by first introducing it in a weakened form?

The conventional wisdom, taught for many years in law schools and contained in numerous articles and books on trial procedure by eminent trial lawyers, is that inoculating the jury at an early stage is the preferred approach. In the

past ten years, however, a vocal minority of commentators created confusion on the issue by mounting a fierce assault on the conventional thinking. Most notable were the proponents of a theory of “sponsorship--” a theory that the jury penalizes, and does not reward, the party who sponsors the bad evidence. See R. Klonoff & P. Colby, *Sponsorship Strategy: Evidentiary Tactics for Winning Jury Trials* (1990). Fortunately, empirical testing of the relative merits of the inoculation and sponsorship theories provides definitive guidance to the trial lawyer and confirms the unambiguous superiority of one theory--the inoculation theory.

The strategy of inoculation offers a tested, effective approach to dealing with bad facts, but does it come at a price? Must a trial lawyer who preemptively discloses bad facts to a jury in order to maximize the chances of prevailing at the trial court level forego a later appeal predicated upon the trial court’s decision to allow the jury to hear about the bad facts? Is it possible to take the sting out of bad facts at the trial court level without getting stung on appeal? The answer, unfortunately, is not as clear as it might be, particularly in light of a recent United States Supreme Court decision, *Ohler v. United States*, 529 U.S. 753, 120 S. Ct. 1851, 146 L. Ed.2d 826 (U.S. 2000). While it arguably offends a sense of justice and fair play to require trial lawyers to choose between inoculation and the preservation of error, the trial lawyer may face just that choice. There are, however, a number of practical steps that the inoculating trial lawyer may take at the trial court level in order to maximize the chances of error preservation for a future appeal.

II. INOCULATION THEORY

Most trial lawyers were trained to inoculate the jury against bad facts--disclose the facts to the jury early in weakened form in order to lessen

the impact in the eyes of the jury and to enhance credibility. This strategy has been referred to by commentators variously as “inoculation,” “preemption,” “volunteering weaknesses,” “confessing your sins,” “pull[ing] the tooth before it infects the case during trial,” airing “dirty laundry,” “put[ting] the weakness in the best light,” “tak[ing] its sting away,” and “revers[ing] a weakness so that it becomes a strength.” See, e.g., Rice & Leggett, “Empirical Study Results Contradict Sponsorship Theory,” 7 No. 8 Inside Litig. 20 (1993); Linz & Penrod, “Increasing Attorney Persuasiveness in the Courtroom,” 8 L. & Psych. Rev. 17-25 (1984); McGuire & Papageorgis, “The Relative Efficacy of Various Types of Prior Belief-defense in Producing Immunity Against Persuasion,” 62 J. Abnorm. & Soc. Psych. 327 (1961); D. Vinson, *Jury Persuasion: Psychological Strategies and Trial Techniques* 127 (1993); Weitz, “Direct Examination of Lay Witnesses,” in *Excellence in Advocacy* 598 (1992); T. Mauet, *Fundamentals of Trial Techniques* 95 (1980); E. Wright, *Winning Courtroom Strategies* 35 (1994); J. Rogers, *Anatomy of a Personal Injury Lawsuit* 225 (3rd ed. 1991); J. McGehee, *The Plaintiff’s Case* 23 (1997); R. Herman, *Courtroom Persuasion* 265 (1997)

Gerry Spence explains the rationale for inoculation-type theories in this way:

Concession is a proper method both to establish credibility ... and to structure a successful argument successfully. I will always concede at the outset whatever is true even if it is detrimental to my argument. Be up-front with the facts that confront you. A concession coming from your mouth is not nearly as hurtful as an exposure coming from your opponent’s. We can be forgiven for a wrongdoing we have committed. We cannot be forgiven for a wrongdoing we have committed and tried to cover up. A point against us can be confessed

and minimized, conceded and explained. The Other will hear us if the concession comes from us. But the Other retains little patience for hearing our explanations after we have been exposed.

J. Spence, *How to Argue and Win Every Time* 131 (1995) (emphasis in original).

Spence is far from the only commentator who supports inoculation, in one form or another. Howard Nations believes that the theory of inoculation derives from Aristotle’s second principle of persuasion--maximize your salient points and minimize your weaknesses. H. Nations, *Powerful Persuasion* 1 <http://www.howardnations.com/covr-toc.html>

Nations justifies inoculation in the following manner:

By directly addressing your weaknesses before the opponent gets the opportunity to do so, you are able to weaken the attack and choose the language with which the weaknesses will be first discussed to the jury. This will convey the important and accurate impression that you are being straightforward and honest with the jury which enhances your own most important characteristic, i.e., credibility. By openly revealing weaknesses in your case and carefully couching your discussion of them, you may successfully inoculate the jury against the inevitable attacks by your opponent. Id.

A third commentator advocates inoculation for the following reasons:

Ordinarily if the harmful evidence is directly related to the issues in the case and is a matter that in all probability your opponent will inquire about on cross-examination, it is preferable to produce it on direct examination. It can be offered at a time and manner in the course of the examination that tends to minimize it rather than

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