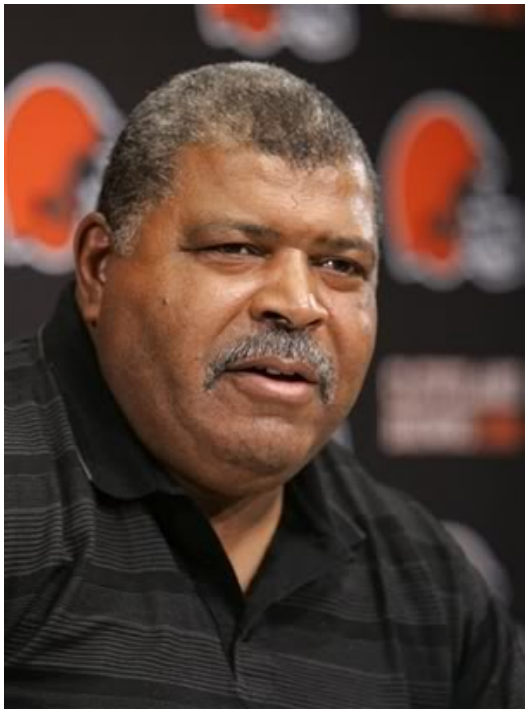
The first step in getting someone to buy what you're selling is to blur the distinction between their wants and their needs. The principle applies whether you're selling cars or toothpaste. Or football coaches. In Gary's latest, he talks about the conflicting reports of ongoing contract negotiations between the Browns and Joe Linta, the agent for Romeo Crennel. And whether or not the Browns should reup with the big man this spring.



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Sports agent Joe Linta, who just a few years ago was peddling stocks and bonds for Prudential Securities, is now peddling football players and coaches to NFL executives. On that score, he's like a thousand others. But in this case, he also represents Browns head coach Romeo Crennel, who still has two years left on the last contract he signed. Linta has spent the last few days trying to convince Browns general manager Phil Savage that the Browns shouldn't just want Crennel under contract for an additional three years, they really need it.

According to a story that made the rounds in the Plain Dealer on Friday, the Browns and Linta supposedly were in on-going talks on an extension for Crennel. Linta told Mary Kay Cabot "the talks were very positive. I really believe [Browns owner] Randy Lerner will want to make Romeo the face of the franchise

for the next five years. Hopefully we can work toward that end."

But in a story on Saturday by Marla Ridenour in the Akron Beacon Journal , Linta denied such talks are on-going. According to Linta this time, he did call the Browns, but not to discuss an extension. Instead, the call, he said :...would be akin to an end-of-the-year evaluation meeting, not necessarily talking about football. '"Nobody said anything about a three-year deal. It was an inquiry from me to see where we stand, 'Let's evaluate this three years into it.'"

Given that Cabot's story appeared before Ridenour's the most plausible explanation is that Linta used Cabot as a pawn in his efforts to manufacture sudden interest in his client. It wouldn't be the first time that an agent used a pliable and gullible member of the media to further the interests of his client.

If you parse Linta's quote to Cabot closely, which neither Cabot nor her editors apparently did, Linta doesn't actually claim that he and the Browns were engaged in contract extension talks, though he implies it mightily. What he does is say specifically is that he spoke with the Browns, though about what he carefully didn't say, probably because he wasn't asked. Then he says he believes Lerner will want to make Crennel the face of the franchise and concludes with a hope that the two sides can work toward that end. You can see the "if dog, rabbit" logic Cabot used when writing her story, but again Linta doesn't actually claim there were any talks of a contract extension. He just let Cabot conclude as much and run with it, which she did.

And for a day, Cabot's story had legs, was all over the internet, and made its way eventually to talk radio on Friday night, where Mark "Munch" Bishop and his guest, former Browns offensive lineman Jim Pyne, implored Savage to indeed make Crennel the face of the franchise because of the positive message it would send to potential free agents about the stability in Cleveland. Bishop then told touching stories of the many unnamed Browns players he spoke to who simply well up when they speak of their love for Crennel and what a swell coach he's been. Why Bishop wouldn't name the players involved is a different issue for

another day. But Bishop's testimonial was then followed by the carefully screened callers who, too, talked about the great job that Crennel has done with the team.

At this point it would seem that Linta had done his job well. Now all that was left was for Savage to take the bait and get a deal done with Crennel right now.

Ridenour wasn't so easily fooled. She contacted Linta (side note: agents are never hard to find when they are trying to make money) and must have asked him directly whether he and the Browns actually had a specific conversation about extending Crennel's contract. To that, Linta had to admit that no, he and the Browns hadn't had such talks but he sure as heck thinks they should because that would make the Browns look "rock solid" to potential free agents. Oops.

Ridenour then apparently asked Linta if he was the source of the Crennel-to-Miami rumors that just happened to precede the Crennel contract extension story. He told Ridenour "it would have been a great rumor for me to plant. I wish I could take credit for it." Not exactly a denial, particularly considering how Linta likes to insinuate one thing when the truth is something else. In other words, it's probably safe to assume that Linta either directly or through someone in his fledging JL Sports agency is indeed the source of that rumor which, just coincidentally, was first reported by another member of the Cleveland media, Tony Rizzo.

Putting this all together, it seems like Negotiation for Dummies by a ham-handed practioner, and it still worked, at least somewhat. The Browns finish 10-6 but missed the playoffs. Fans are strangely thrilled with another season watching others play for the Super Bowl. Rizzo gets a "hot tip" from an unnamed source that new Miami Dolphins president Bill Parcells is interested in Crennel (if only that were true!). That rumor is picked up by ProFootballTalk.com, a gossipy web site that allegedly is read by NFL executives but is surely read by others in the media. Suddenly, it's a national story, big surprise. Next, Crennel's agent surfaces to imply that the Browns and Crennel are talking extension, the not

so subtle further implication being that Savage is so concerned about Parcells stealing his coach that he needs to get a deal done now. The local media gets into a further feeding frenzy and the next thing you know there is such a groundswell of support for Crennel that it would seem foolish for Savage not to extend Crennel's contract.

Too bad that Ridenour had to come along and throw cold water on this all. To that point this whole thing was following pretty much the story line from the brilliant little movie, "For Your Consideration" in which a technician on a movie set tells an actress that he heard from his girlfriend who supposedly saw a story on the internet that someone who had visited the movie set saw the actress's performance and it was "Oscar worthy." The press agent for the film latches on to the story tells another and another and suddenly there is Oscar buzz in Hollywood among the media about the movie itself and each and every actor in it. It builds to the point where there is talk that the movie itself, which was retooled in response to the Oscar buzz, would get a Best Picture nod. In the end, there was nothing much to any of it, the film is ignored and so too was the actress.

In the end, there really isn't much to this Crennel extension story, either. It's all pretty petty stuff really but it is nonetheless fascinating to see the inertia that can be created through a little media manipulation by an agent whose only real concern is to make money for his client and for himself. Blaming Linta for acting like an agent would be like blaming a snake for slithering. That doesn't excuse the local media for its part in facilitating what is essentially a non-story, Ridenour excepted, nor should it obscure the bottom line reality in all of it: an extension of Crennel's contract at this point is premature at best.

Just because Linta claims Crennel would be a lame duck with only two years on his contract doesn't make it so. Crennel with one year left on his contract wouldn't make him a lame duck, either. All it really means is that the team is taking a wait-and-see approach, which seems about the right thing to do with a coach who is averaging less than seven wins a season in his three years in charge. Besides, if contract length meant anything, Brian Billick would still be the head coach in Baltimore. Last season he was rewarded with a four-year extension and was fired this year after going 5-11.

The other thing to keep in mind is that professional football players really do understand that they are in a business and not just a sport. Coaches getting hired and fired is all just part of the job. Nobody likes the uncertainty that instability at the top creates, but when it comes to professional ball players with relatively short careers, money is far more important. Put it this way, for every free agent who claims he signed with a team because the head coach is supposedly firmly established, there is an equal and opposite number who signs with a franchise that just fired its head coach because it represents a new start and new direction. In other words, it's about the money.

Linta has a vested interest in extolling Crennel's virtues and hiding his flaws. But if it was prudent for Savage not to fire Crennel after last season's 4-12 debacle, it's just as prudent for Savage not to get overly jazzed about this year's 10-6 season either. Somewhere between these two seemingly opposite results is an underlying truth about Crennel's abilities as a head coach. If Randy Lerner is really as smart as Linta claims, then letting the truth about Crennel be revealed over its more natural course is what actually serves the Browns interests far more than getting caught up in the manufactured hype of an agent. It also is likely to save Lerner a pile of money.