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MediaTalk; AOL Sees a Different Side of Time Warner

By JIM RUTENBERG

Executives at America Online are learning what it means to be in business with Ted Turner, the company's vice chairman.

Despite having a knack for making insensitive, off-the-cuff remarks about religion and ethnicity, Mr. Turner had largely stayed out of trouble since AOL and Time Warner announced they would merge.

Other than letting it be publicly known that he was unhappy with an AOL Time Warner flow chart that took away his control of his cable empire -- CNN, TBS, TNT, Cartoon Network, Turner South -- Mr. Turner had not made a controversial peep.

That ended on Ash Wednesday, when, at a meeting with CNN staff members, he looked out at a crowd speckled with people who had ash on their foreheads in observance of the day.

Those present said Mr. Turner told the gathering that he at first thought the ash marks were grime from covering the Seattle earthquake. But, he said, then "I realize you're just Jesus freaks."

Then, in reference to the Fox News Channel, which is regarded by some to have a conservative bent, he added, "Shouldn't you guys be working for Fox?"

Mr. Turner's remarks, for which he later apologized, were first reported by the Fox News Channel and then on Page 1 of The New York Post, both owned by the News Corporation, the company of his fiercest rival, Rupert Murdoch.

Catholic groups reacted angrily. The controversy was given new life when Stuart Varney, the co-anchor of CNN's "Moneyline News Hour," quit, citing the remarks (though it was widely believed that there were other issues involved as well).

Of course, executives at Time Warner are used to this sort of trouble from Mr. Turner. He has compiled a long list of verbal, public offenses. Among them: He once called Christianity "a

religion for losers"; he referred to the 1997 suicides of 39 people in the Heaven's Gate cult as "a way to get rid of a few nuts"; he made a derogatory remark about Poles and the pope; and he called opponents of abortion "bozos."

But this is a new experience for executives at AOL.

It seems, though, that they have accepted the incident with the same sort of fatalism that Time Warner did.

Though the company had no official comment, one ranking executive said: "Look, with Ted you get a lot of great, big thoughts. You get a great spirit, and you get a really smart guy. But you also get somebody who from time to time says whatever he happens to be thinking at the moment. Whether he thinks it tomorrow isn't necessarily the case, but that's the whole package."

For his part, Mr. Turner had no comment. For now.

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Photo: Ted Turner is known for making off-the-cuff remarks on religion. (Associated Press)