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A long-time spinmeister demystifies grand mythology of 'spin'

Allan Bonner's sensational book delves into symbiotic relationship between journalists and communicators

BY MARK ENTWISTLE
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Allow me first to declare the fact that I have known Allan Bonner for over 15 years and that I received my first media training from him when I was a junior diplomat at Foreign Affairs.

Since then I have been in media relations and communications for a decade, learning through mistakes but always returning in my mind and instincts to Mr. Bonner's deliberate approach to communications.

The book *Doing and Saying the Right Thing: Professional Risk and Crisis Management*, is not about media relations; Mr. Bonner's goal is both bigger and more basic. He seeks rather to demystify the art, and sometimes science, of being able to communicate clearly and effectively, especially under pressure before the media. There is a difference between being trained to speak with journalists and understanding how to communicate ideas. By wearing certain colours and avoiding other kinds of ties, we can look better on television, but Mr. Bonner's book is about what you say, how you say it and why you say it.

The author argues that transferring information or data is not the same thing as communicating.

Mr. Bonner has coined the acronym SOCKO, which stands for "Strategic Overriding Communications and Knowledge Objective." Sounds worse than what it does. In fact, it is a strategic approach to telling it like it is by building modules of content in advance to be assembled as required. In the first third of the book, he builds meticulously the model of a complete communications "system" and describes how it is a way of thinking as well as a "pre-facto crisis management system." No better way to avoid bailing yourself or someone else out of self-inflicted press pain than by having the mouth's safety catch switched on. It is also a time management and speech preparation system at the same time.

After deconstructing communications into its component parts, the author moves on in the middle of the book to instruct on the application of the SOCKO system in concrete practical terms. The



LEGENDARY: Henry Kissinger once entered a press room declaring, 'Does anyone have questions for my answers?'

most important part of the book for communications professionals is housed in the last section, where the author talks about the everyday challenges facing communicators under fire.

Mr. Bonner's book is an antidote to the mythology of "spin." I never believed in the entire self-serving popular notion of spin and that there are extra-clever "doctors" spinning webs of words that entrap listeners. It presupposes that journalists are stupid. The reality is a symbiotic rela-

tionship between journalists and communicators where mutual interests are advanced and which is sustained by advanced planning, unflinching attention to issues and reputation.

It is a premise of Mr. Bonner's book that there is no free ride in communications. You have to do the work over and over again.

Mr. Bonner devotes a welcome chapter to the concept of reputation. It is an intangible but critical secret to the success of

communications and seldom discussed as Mr. Bonner does. If journalists sense for a split second that a communicator either does not know what is happening, or worse misleading them, the gig is up. A communicator must nurture and fight to protect reputation as an asset, often in the face of office colleagues who do not understand the delicate balance in the public trench.

For anyone who has worked in public affairs in government or large corporations, one of the most useful but brief sections of the book treats the useless affliction known as the "Q and A." Mr. Bonner argues concisely for a radical overhaul of the practice in which Ministers, CEOs and Presidents should be provided with building blocks of ideas and information, which are used to guide conversation, instead of reams of speculative questions with pre-calculated and minimalist answers to be memorized. In other words, turn the machine on its head. No one I ever worked with used Q and As, despite the relentless hours of work and energy put into preparing them. They are too artificial, too linear in logic and too disconnected from the real world.

Mr. Bonner reminds us of a legendary Henry Kissinger story, who entered a press room to ask "Does anyone have questions for my answers?"

There is no shortage of people who should read this book, starting with the legions of public relations and communications professionals. But, more importantly, I recommend it to those numerous individuals in senior positions throughout organizations who believe they are naturally born communicators who can wing it. They should treat Mr. Bonner's book like a religious text and return to it again and again for guidance.

Doing and Saying the Right Thing: Professional Risk and Crisis Management, by Allan Bonner, Golden Dog Publications, 2001.

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