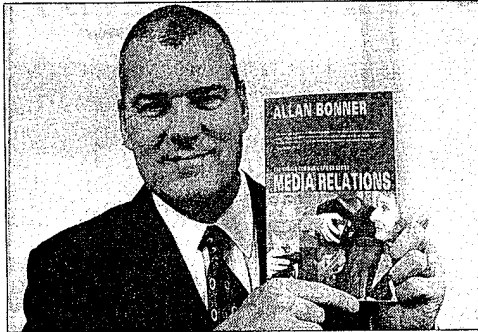


LEADER-POST

AUTHOR



By **SHERI BLOCK**
Leader-Post

Images of government officials eating Chinese food and Canadian beef was not the way to quell fears of SARS and mad cow disease, according to media trainer Allan Bonner.

"I'm shocked, appalled and chagrined at the superficiality of what I call 'the eating cure.' We get SARS and politicians go to Chinatown and have Chinese food in a Chinese restaurant when Chinatown has nothing to do with SARS. Then we get mad cow — and politicians start sticking beef in their faces."

Instead, officials should have provided reasoned, scientific information to the public within one to five days, then put the risk in context.

"If you miss that opportunity, you'll have a tremendous uphill battle thereafter," said Bonner, who said officials should have been better prepared for the two crises.

Being prepared is what crisis management is all about, said Bonner, who heads The Centre for Training in Risk and Crisis Management in Toronto.

A former journalist who worked at CBC Regina in the late '70s, Bonner uses his media expertise to counsel government, diplomats and organizations around the world on public and sensitive issues.

Get your message out to the media

His new book *Media Relations* offers advice for individuals or groups on how to develop a communication strategy and deal with the media.

He advises them to use the SOCKO (Strategic Overriding Communications and Knowledge Objective) method of getting a message across. The phrase implies impact, something every journalist seeks with their lead, clip or headline.

SOCKO also involves assessing the news value of the item, clear thinking and looking at the big picture.

"The major emphasis is on technical know-how. How do you evaluate the newsworthiness of your organization and what it is you have to say to a reporter that is of any use."

While the book focuses on understanding what reporters want and getting out information, it also deals with ways the organization can keep its message intact and be portrayed positively.

"There is some, let's say, 'verbal karate' in there or defensive moves or spin — of course, there is because you find that in some journalists. You find that with some shareholders, some stakeholders, some NGOs. It would be irresponsible not to put an antidote to that in there. But you only need 'karate' if somebody attacks you," said Bonner.

People are often afraid of the media

because it's human nature to be nervous when you're singled out from other corporations or government agencies, and your personal credentials are questioned.

He added that reporters are often aggressive and invade interviewees' 'space' with microphones and requests to stand a certain way and speak on demand.

Early in his journalism career, Bonner said he interviewed many people who appeared guilty, shifty and incompetent. Years later, he realized some were innocent.

"They didn't know where to look, how to sit, what's going to happen here. For somebody who isn't used to it ... it can be very disconcerting."

His advice? If you're asked a clear question by a reporter, give a direct answer. Talk to the media unless circumstances prohibit — and don't refuse to answer phone calls.

The biggest misconception about reporters is that they're out to trap you or misquote you. So the worst thing people can do is go into an interview with a chip on their shoulder.

Conversely, he recommends reporters do their research and refuse to get caught up in the "treadmill of official handouts" like press releases, open houses and photo opportunities. The newsworthiness of every item should be analysed and brush-offs should not be accepted.

For more information about *Media Relations*, log onto www.allanbonner.com