

The Dangers of Spin

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Envision a world without one ethical PR practitioner. Every communication to the media is spin: Reporters can never trust anything a practitioner says. The PR practitioner does anything, says anything to get coverage or prevent it. The practitioner relates facts, if they benefit his organization (or himself) or denies them if they don't. It would be a world of puffery, charges and counter-charges, whisper campaigns, dirty tricks, innuendo, leaks and hostility. A reporter would always wonder who is gouging whom, who is up, who is down, when another is lying and when not. The practitioner himself might spin so often he no longer knows what is fact and what isn't. For reporters and practitioners it might be an exciting game of detectives and villains, but it would also be cynical. There would be no belief in honest motivations, only in subtexts and intents. The world would be a dystopia of distrust and ultimately, exhausting. One could hardly have friends in the media, for there would be no basis for trust.

What is spin?

It is best to define spin by what it isn't – a reasoned argument on the behalf of one's position that accounts for the facts for and against the position. Spin has been described as:

- Portraying events or situations in one's favor through heavily biased interpretation.
- Deceptive and/or manipulative tactics.
- Presenting only the evidence that supports one's position.
- Assuming unproven facts to be true.
- Using euphemisms to cover up facts or make them ambiguous.
- Distorting facts to ride a story or burying facts to avoid having them reported.

Spin, in other words, is a number of variations on lying and lack of transparency that breaks the delicate bond of trust between a PR practitioner and a reporter. In a world of spin, finding facts becomes more difficult and credibility and reputation are at deep risk.

Spin and lack of trust

It is hard to understand the dangers of spin until one grasps a world without trust. Lack of trust in a PR practitioner leads to lack of trust in an organization and its leaders. For why would a leader or organization allow an untrustworthy

spokesperson to represent them unless the organization and its leadership are untrustworthy, or culpably ignorant? The public face of an organization by extension stands for the private face of leadership. Reporters do not divorce the two. Either the leader and organization are untrustworthy, or they are stupid and unaware how their PR practitioner is damaging their cause through spin.

Further, an organization that employs a PR practitioner who spins cannot trust him, for the organization can never know when the practitioner spins for himself or for the organization. Even if a practitioner has shown repeatedly that he is a “loyalist,” there can be no certainty that one who lies on behalf of an organization and its leadership might not lie to the organization and its leadership. There is room for betrayal that only the power of the leader and of the organization can strive to prevent. A leader gains loyalty through force or compensation. Even then, there is a worm of doubt. Leaders and organizations concerned for their credibility will get rid of PR practitioners who can’t be trusted to be accurate.

Reporters’ lack of trust in a spinning PR practitioner leads directly to reputation loss for the organization and its leaders. An untrustworthy practitioner loses credibility and reputation with reporters whom he spins. By extension, reporters learn not to trust communications from the organization and its leaders, whose reputations they devalue.

Lack of trust leads to inefficient communications. If a PR practitioner can’t trust what the organization says to him and vice versa, then the practitioner and the organization have to expend extra labor to verify what has been said, or knowingly accept explanations that might be lies. Or, the practitioner may have no regard for accuracy as long as there is a positive short-term outcome for himself, the organization and its leadership. If a practitioner can “pull one over” on reporters, all the better. Even though reporters crosscheck information, they parse good sources from bad ones. They know a good source provides information that is accurate time and again while a poor source imposes a burden on them. If a reporter is able to relate accurately what an organization and its leadership are doing, the spinning practitioner puts the reporter on an enemies list. This leads to a narrowing of outlets and further inefficiency in communicating an organization’s viewpoint. Moreover, the media will conclude eventually that nothing can be accepted at face value. This was the case during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Kremlin watchers discounted official communications and looked for clues elsewhere, including who was present on the reviewing stand for annual May Day parades as a way to tell them who was in, who was out and the balance of power among members of the Politburo.

Lack of trust leads to general corruption of communications. While it is possible for leaders and organizations to be schizophrenic, – spinning to reporters but telling the facts to other stakeholders – it is improbable and ineffective. Audiences talk to one another, and information filters from one group to the next. With the internet, this is especially true. Therefore, there is a tendency for

leaders and organizations to spin to all groups, which makes it difficult to know the information one needs to act. A variant is refusing to talk to reporters, but talking to others, such as financial analysts. This doesn't work because financial analysts talk to reporters, and facts are passed on with an analyst's bias added. Public companies, because they make public filings to the US Securities and Exchange Commission, are foolhardy if they communicate selectively.

Lack of trust means effective communications are imperiled. "Effective communications" are communications that strive for a result. The result may be an attitude toward an organization and its leadership or an action one wants an audience to take. If reporters don't trust an organization, they won't readily adopt a different attitude about it or act in a way the organization desires.

Lack of trust with the media means customers, employees and shareholders won't believe the organization and its leadership because reporters will portray the company and its leadership as untrustworthy. This lends to a number of undesirable outcomes – falling sales, higher warranty costs, ineffective operations, employee disturbances and a discounted stock price.

Lack of trust with the media also means regulatory and government entities won't trust an organization and its leadership, which leads to larger compliance costs. Even though a PR practitioner may never deal with a regulator or government entity, a spirit of spinning tends to pervade an organization and its leadership. Spinning can create an attitude of "getting around" regulation and "getting away" from governmental controls. Regulators are not fools forever, if at all. Assuming they are not corrupted, sooner or later they know where to look and what to look for. This burdens an organization, and consumes attention better spent on operations.

Lack of trust deepens uncertainty and distrust over time. If a PR practitioner and/or organization is untrustworthy over time, reporters distrust it more deeply over time. Likewise, for trustworthiness. If an organization deals honestly over time, reporters learn to trust it. Some reporters reach an absolute condition of distrust or trust and will not change their minds, but others reserve judgment, as they should.

Preventing spin

Trust is fragile. It takes only one discovered lie to throw into suspicion every other communication that has gone before or might come afterward. To those who say the goal then is to make sure spin is not discovered for what it is, the answer is that with the internet and increased transparency, there is less chance a lie will remain hidden, especially in high profile situations. Spin begets spin to cover the original lie. The more spin, the greater the chance some of it will be exposed. Thus, it is better not to spin at all. A practitioner might be tempted to tell a "little lie" to ward off a reporter, but that is perilous. Any lie in which a

practitioner is caught verifies what many reporters believe: PR practitioners are sleazeballs.

Reputation counts. A good reputation is the summation of consistent and trustworthy ethical actions observed by others. A person whose actions are inconsistent and unethical isn't trustworthy and earns a poor reputation. Organizations are comprised of individuals, and organizational reputations are the summation of individual character and actions. Organizations that allow inconsistent and untrustworthy ethical actions on the part of some individuals place the entire company and its employees in jeopardy. Think of Enron. A practitioner is better off working with and in organizations where good reputation is prized. That way, the practitioner does not have to struggle with leadership when it comes time to choose between spin and accuracy. The organization understands the importance of maintaining trust. On the other hand, practitioners who work with and in organizations where spin is part of the culture, should be prepared to battle for accuracy with finesse and persistence.

Deal straight up with the media with the understanding that your objective and reporters' aims are usually different. When there are things you must not divulge, tell a reporter you can't talk about certain topics. And, if a reporter doesn't ask, there is no need to raise an issue. If the CEO's husband has checked into a drug rehabilitation center, it is no business of a reporter to know. The husband is a private person. On the other hand, there may be an issue, if the CEO has done so, which puts a PR practitioner in a position that lends itself to spinning. For example, publicists for Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer, were in a position to be compromised when Jobs kept his deteriorating health quiet. But, even with this kind of tension, a practitioner should maintain open and honest communication, as far as the practitioner can. Some CEOs bar PR practitioners from knowing certain information, so practitioners won't have to spin. This is foolishness. The practitioner will look ignorant when dealing with reporters and will appear to have lied when facts come out. It damages a practitioner's reputation, which is why some practitioners leave organizations that keep them in the dark.

Communicate facts. Avoid opinion and guesses. Be open about ignorance and assiduous in finding answers when you don't know. Reliance on facts is necessary to prevent loss of credibility and trust with reporters and others who have reasons to be wary. Provide them with details they can check for themselves and invite them to do so. With details a reporter can't check, be accurate. In a world of increasing transparency, sooner or later private information may become public. If one has been sloppy, that will become apparent, and one's reputation will suffer. On the other hand, a practitioner, known to be accurate in large details and small, eventually gains a reputation for trustworthiness.

Stay on the record as much as possible. Transparency counts and is a way to show that one's motivation is above board. Dishing dirt off-the-record is a poor way to do business, although the media may lap up inside details. On the other hand, there is informational backgrounding that you might not want to make public. For example, a client provided off-the-record information to reporters about proposed Federal legislation. The client did not wish to inject itself into a public debate over the proposed bill, but it did see a need to educate reporters about details of a pending bill.

Avoid "truth" as a word. A practitioner may not know the truth of a situation or issue, only the facts of it. There can be many versions of "truth," none of which are quite true to the reality of what has occurred. The true cause of a plane crash, for example, may take years of investigation to determine what occurred, and a reconstruction of the accident may not be possible because participants are dead. In the fable of the blind men touching an elephant, each took a fact and arrived at a 'truth' that was an inaccurate description of the creature. A PR practitioner's credibility grows with each crosschecked fact that proves to be accurate. Accuracy is the first and most important metric of a PR practitioner.

In the end, it is easier to be a PR practitioner through avoiding spin than it is by using it. Those who see PR as warfare with winners and losers are not likely to agree with this. For them, gaining advantage in the moment is more important than winning the war in the end. They are master tacticians but lousy strategists. As Abraham Lincoln said, "You can't fool all of the people all of the time."

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