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Is the interactive era turning marketing into public relations?

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ABSTRACT

In this book review of *Spin: How Politics Has the Power to Turn Marketing on its Head* by Clive Veroni (House of Anansi, 2014), the author discusses how advertising revolutionized politics in the twentieth century and how politics is returning the favour in the twenty-first. He discusses how Clive Veroni correctly identifies the new era of interactivity brought about by the internet, social media and digital communications. The reviewer argues that some of the strongest points of Veroni's book are his discussions of the concepts of the open branding, team building and scenario planning. Veroni's examples and theory make an implicit yet direct link between marketing and the professions of communication through two central themes that he identifies: the exploded fragmented media and mindscape in which practitioners operate and the increasingly dialogical and fluid nature of brands. Many of the elements of political communication that Veroni identifies as pillars of the future of marketing are in fact pillars of the strategic practice of public relations.

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Advertising revolutionized the practice of political communication in the twentieth century and now political communication is returning the favour, according to Toronto-based advertising consultant, Clive Veroni in his engaging and clearly written book, *Spin: How Politics Has the Power to Turn Marketing on its Head*.

There is a central point in *Spin*: in an era of social media dominated by interpersonal communications, the keys to achieving business objectives are: relationships, engagement and narrative. While his book is focused on marketing, it became obvious to me that, in fact, he was describing pillars of public relations and communications management practice.

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Rather than focusing on public relations, Veroni uses one of its sub-fields, political communication, as a vehicle to describe how marketing has to change. In my experience, he is correct in stating that relationship building and management has quickly become the most direct way of getting your brand into consumers' minds and then into their social networks. I also feel that choosing political communication was smart since, in Canada at least, political communications budgets are small and the level of innovation in communications management is forcibly very high. Veroni sees relationship and community building as central to political communication, which is particularly true in Canada where volunteer pools can be very small and geographically far-flung. All of these factors make effective communications a central part of effective political communications.

I have long thought of political communication as a laboratory and Petri dish for innovation in communications management, given that everything must be done quickly and accomplished on a shoestring budget. This is why I recommend that students and junior communicators get involved in political communication and marketing as an effective way to network with a varied group of contacts, gain experience in team building, and become more aware of what works and what does not.

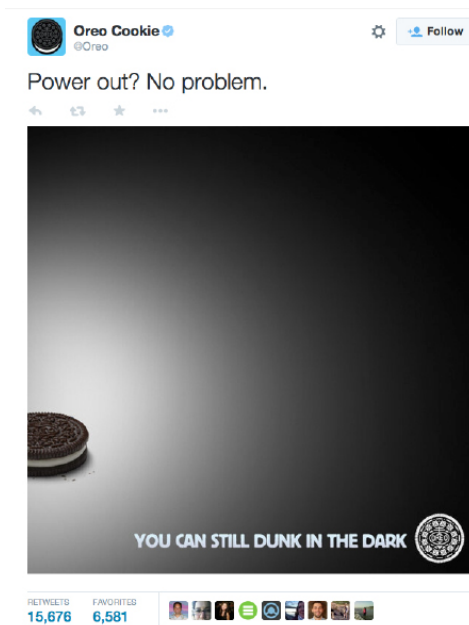
As Veroni mentions (p. 3), the rise of political communication is alluded to in the the first season of *Mad Men*, which saw the show's main character, Don Draper, commits to supporting Richard Nixon's unsuccessful campaign against John F. Kennedy. That campaign is a metaphor for what political communication was to become – an arena no longer dominated by substance and structure but instead driven by image and symbol. Nixon may have substantively won the debate against Kennedy, but he lost the style and image war by appearing less confident and statesmanlike on television. If today's interactive era existed then, John F. Kennedy would have had to forge relationships with voters through interpersonal communication. It would have been interesting to see whether Nixon's perceived authenticity would have been an equalizing force to Kennedy's glamour and smoothness in the social media world. I suspect that the answer is likely not.

Philosophers and cultural theorists have spent the past thirty years defining the postmodern era as an historic period marked by the rise of fluid identity politics and self-determination in lieu of categorical definitions of self, society and the traditional news media. Since the internet transformed the world with the meteoric rise in popularity of the world wide web in the late 1990s, I would argue that we're in a post-postmodern era: an interactive era marked by interpersonal communication rather than mass communication as the standard for marketing and public relations practice.

Clive Veroni places this new interactive reality at the center of the thesis he is putting forward in *Spin*: the massive shift to user generated content brought on by digital communications. He identifies three main factors that have motivated this transformation away from structure and toward dialogue: an evolving and participatory audience, the importance of immediacy and the power of human engagement.

Veroni is insightful in noting that political campaign communicators know that their control over the message is very tenuous and that the campaign relies on getting voting publics and influencers to adopt and then spread the message. Potential voters and influencers have to understand it, feel it, experience it and then be able to put that experience into words, pictures and sounds for their friends in a way that brings about new converts.

This viral spread is something that traditional marketers and public relations professionals have tried to engineer, to which Veroni wisely says that knowledge of your audience and having a sense of the moment are really the key. He cites Oreo's quick and clever guerrilla public relations response to the blackout at Superbowl XLVII in New Orleans (pp. 207-14): "You can still dunk in the dark," which went viral because it made sense at the moment and was in context with what was actually going on. It also allowed for a shared experience as people tweeted and retweeted Oreo's phrase throughout the night.



Spin contains several examples of how, in the new world of professional communication, campaigning to cause ire can be as effective as campaigning to please and seduce. He cites Tom Ford's racy advert for Yves Saint Laurent in 2000 featuring a naked, reclining Sophie Dahl painted entirely in white, which generated more complaints from the British public than almost any other advert (pp. 64-66).



From the world of political communication, Veroni gives the example of Stephen Harper turning off the lights during Earth Hour and sending a message directly to his often curmudgeonly base that he is aligned with them by spurning a fashionably activist-driven public moment (pp. 48-50). Both of these actions sent a clear brand message and spilt barrels of digital and analog ink, starting millions of conversations along the way. Provocative actions such as these helped set the Yves Saint Laurent and Harper brands firmly into the minds of target audiences as mental bookmarks.

Veroni is convinced that marketers have to learn that the target audience needs to be persuaded and that data may allow us to gain insight into but not achieve certainty about what consumers are thinking and feeling. Indeed, I believe Veroni is right in suggesting that both marketing and public relations face the same challenge: how to replace the data and analysis provided by traditional market research with reliable insights into the patterns and trends that shape consumers beliefs, desires, attitudes and behaviours. He suggests that big data will help us quantify relationship strength and he's right. The question is, how this will be done? The brands that succeed in

providing such metrics will win in the new arena for communications and marketing: relationship management.

Some of the strongest points of Veroni's book are his discussions of the concepts of the open branding, team building and scenario planning. Veroni describes the *open brand* as an invitation to strangers to engage with their brands or vice versa:

Open branding need not be a change to be feared, so long as marketers understand that it's not about giving free rein to all comers to tamper with your brand. Instead, it's about creating an environment where talented people who are passionate about the brand will feel free to engage with it on their own (p. 153).

This does sound very similar to what public relations and communications management have at their core: building dialogical relationships with consumers that allow them to engage with brands. Again, Veroni argues for an increased influence for public relations coming to the aid of traditional marketing. In his discussion of the open brand, he makes the case that political communicators understand that winning campaigns ask a powerful ballot question. Here, Veroni's book is a valuable complement to the argument made in *The Cluetrain Manifesto* that markets have become conversations (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2009, p. 147). He claims that most brands have not yet understood this concept and need to work on their brand positioning statements to make them be more like ballot questions: they should ask which issues consumers care about. Veroni identifies that this is a step towards building credibility for the brand in the minds of consumers – essentially, building reputation, another pillar of public relations practice.

Spin is engaging in its discussion of team building in the interactive era. According to Veroni, teams need to: focus on winning, recruit a diverse group of people, dissolve hierarchies in favour of collaboration, and develop an inspiring mission. These are all elements of the creative workplace, discussed in a [practical paper](#) published in a previous issue of JPC by Ginny Jones and Denise O'Connor (2012). As Veroni emphasizes in *Spin*, building a creative workplace is a key area in which communications management has many experiences, insights and answers to contribute.

Veroni discusses the centrality of another area of communications management practice to the new era of marketing: scenario planning, which in the practice of public relations is often referred to as *issues management* or *crisis communications*. This is also an area of overlap where public relations has a well-developed database of case studies and theory grounding to offer.

actions are captured and stored in perpetuity and with extraordinary granularity, and that it is pattern recognition and insight that will win the day over traditional market research. In this I believe he is entirely correct. Marshall McLuhan said it almost fifty years ago: "Faced with information overload, we have no alternative but pattern-recognition" (McLuhan, 1969, p.132).

Veroni outlines three steps to insight through pattern recognition that he has developed in his years of practice in advertising. First, recognize a pattern in the data using empathy and your understanding of narrative. Next, develop a thesis about this pattern. And third, play back the thesis to someone else in a compelling fashion. This is a handy algorithm that Veroni expands on and justifies nicely with examples in the book. It will be encouraging to the many humanities students who work in communications to hear that Veroni credits his humanities degrees with giving him the tools to formulate his method.

Veroni's book has been criticized in other reviews for being too impressionistic, for not tying together all of the threads that he starts or for not explicitly making the link between the examples he sources from the worlds of political communication and advertising/marketing. I disagree. In fact, I find that the impressionistic quality of Veroni's writing mirrors the conversational flow of post-postmodern interactive communications – it is largely left to the reader to fill in the blanks as to what connects them, much like social media publics are asked to largely infer brand identity from a shifting kaleidoscope of conversational contact points on or about a brand, all perceived from the ultra-personal limits of the individual's attention, memory and predilections. In my opinion, this is a strength of *Spin* rather than a weakness.

Spin is a great read for public relations and communications management students and practitioners. Veroni's examples and theory make an implicit yet direct link between marketing and the professions of communication through two central themes that he identifies: the exploded fragmented media and mindscape in which practitioners operate; and the increasingly conversational and fluid nature of brand-building. Many of the elements of political communication that Veroni identifies as pillars of the future of marketing are in fact pillars of the strategic practice of public relations and communications management.

This key insight, and the way in which Veroni indirectly validates the strategic importance of public relations are key parts of what makes his book important for professional communicators – *Spin* charts a map for how to make the case that public relations should be at the decision making table, bringing its theory and expertise to bear to form campaign strategy, from the first moments of planning through implementation.

Spin makes the case that when brands have to engage with and compete in a world of billions of conversations, relationships are central. In the world of relationship management, public relations is key. The challenge for public relations practitioners is to capitalize on the opportunities Veroni describes by seizing their place and proving their value through strategy, insight and confidence.

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