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## Spin versus Topspin

*The Political World versus the Business World*

In the competitive world of politics, jockeying for position is often expressed by **spinning**, the dark art of attempting to influence public perception in one's favor or against that of the opposition. Spinning can be as harmless as gilding the lily, or it can escalate to distortion or even to outright deception; however, all the points along that scale are of dubious integrity.

One of the best examples of political spin is the 1998 film *Wag the Dog*, in which a U.S. president is accused of a scandalous liaison. To limit his damage, the president calls in a Washington spin doctor, played by Robert DeNiro, who proceeds to retain a Hollywood producer, played by Dustin Hoffman, and together they concoct a fictional war in the Balkans.

In this scenario, spin could more accurately be called "slant," for the tactic diverts attention away from the main issue. Spin is akin to the sleight-of-hand magicians use to misdirect audiences. This is not to say that a politician, a businessperson, a representative of an organization, or anyone in *any* competitive walk of life—including *you*—should not do everything you can to defend your own cause and position it in a favorable light. However, before you do so, you must address the issue directly; only then can you go on to counterbalance the negativity by *adding* your own message.

This additive instead of digressive approach is called **Topspin**, a subject covered in detail in *In the Line of Fire*. Topspin is a tennis term that refers to a power stroke that causes the ball to bounce sharply and give a player a winning advantage. In presentations, Topspin is a positive statement or restatement of a key message that gives a speaker a winning advantage.

But just as tennis players must first meet the ball before applying Topspin, presenters must first address the central issue directly before adding their own message. They must earn the right to state their case. Politicians rarely address issues; businesspersons must always do so. In business, accountability trumps messaging.

For instance, if a salesperson were to be asked by a customer, "Why do you charge so much more for your product than your competition does?" the salesperson could respond, "The reason we sell our product at that price point is because we provide you with a service guarantee that extends the life of the product. When you buy our product, you get more for your money."

Notice that the response doesn't deny the price point, nor does it agree that the price is high. Thus, the salesperson acknowledges the negativity in the question without any evasion, admission, or contention. Then, having addressed the issue directly, the response continues to Topspin with a call to action ("When you buy our product") and a benefit ("you get more for your money").

Topspin is a world apart from spin.

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## What Keeps You Up at Night?

### *How to Handle the Most Frequently Asked Questions*

“What keeps you up at night?” and “What is your greatest weakness?” are perhaps the two most frequently asked questions (FAQs) in business—the first in presentations and the second in interviews. Yet both questions, by their frequent recurrence, are traps for glib answers that could derail the person who provides the answers.

Joann Lublin’s career column in the *Wall Street Journal* offered advice about how to handle the interview FAQ about weakness, starting with what *not* to say. She provided a long list of common glib answers, ranging from “I am a perfectionist” to “I am a workaholic”—all of which offer a strength instead of a weakness and, therefore, appear evasive. Ms. Lublin recommended better, more candid answers, such as having a “tendency to make decisions too fast.” But then she concluded with the most important piece of advice: that any answer to such a question should “cover your corrective steps.” (F65.1)

This same advice is also applicable to the “What keeps you up at night?” question in presentations. That question has become ritual in every type of presentation and every type of business. It is phrased in those exact words. Not “What problems do you foresee?” Not “What can go wrong?” Not “What are your threats?” But “What keeps you up at night?”

What should you say in response?

What *not* to say in reply to this universal question is to make a joke about newborn babies, neighbors’ dogs, air conditioners or the like. Everyone has heard every variation on that lame theme. What *to* say must be purely candid—a direct answer to a direct question. In business, evasion is not an option. With almost daily revelations of public corruption that are met with denial, evasion, or blaming others, transparency has become more important than ever.

Be frank. Tell your questioner what keeps you up at night, but then immediately add what actions you are taking to correct those issues. “What keeps me up at night is \_\_\_\_\_, and what I’m doing about it is \_\_\_\_\_.”

Accountability is all.

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## A Lesson in Listening from Barack Obama

### *How to Handle Multiple Questions*

Listening, the social skill that is becoming extinct in the twenty-first century, is rapidly being replaced by rudeness. This behavior, which is merely annoying in social circles, can be destructive in the more mission-critical circumstances of business and politics.

One of the most common instances of not listening comes in response to multiple questions. Because such queries are usually a rambling set of unrelated issues, it is difficult for any presenter to remember all the diverse parts. Two common responses are to answer only one of the questions and then to ignore the second question by moving on to another questioner, or to answer the first question and then to turn back to the questioner and say, "What was your other question?" Both of those responses create the perception of not listening. Not listening leads to failure.

One way to handle multiple questions is to pick only one, answer it, and then turn back to the questioner and say, "You had another question." Note the difference between that statement and "What was your other question?" which is a question about the question. This technique will result in one of two responses from the questioner. That person will either tell you what the other question was or say, "That's okay, you covered it." Both results take you off the hook.

Barack Obama used another technique for handling multiple questions. In a White House press conference, Jeff Zeleny of the *New York Times* asked him, "During these first 100 days, what has surprised you the most about this office, enchanted you the most about serving in this office, humbled you the most, and troubled you the most?"

The president immediately reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a pen, and said, "Let me write this down," producing a wave of laughter from the other reporters in the East Room of the White House.

As Mr. Obama began writing, Mr. Zeleny began to restate his question, "Surprised ... troubled ..."

Mr. Obama said, "I've got---what was the first one?"

Mr. Zeleny repeated, "Surprised ..."

Mr. Obama repeated, "Surprised ..."

Mr. Zeleny repeated, "Troubled ..."

Mr. Obama repeated, "Troubled ..."

Mr. Zeleny repeated, "Enchanted ..."

The president said, "Enchanted," then smiled and added, "Nice, evoking more laughter. (F63.1)

Barack Obama had carefully listened to the question, confirmed that he had listened by restating what he heard, and then reconfirmed by writing what he heard, sending a clear message of his attentiveness.

Compare his approach to the usual evasive response from most politicians. We have learned to tolerate, if not endure, nonanswers from politicians, but no man or woman can get away with evasiveness in business. However, business presenters often give the *appearance* of evasiveness because they handle multiple questions poorly. They do so not to evade, but because they don't address a convoluted question fully. Nevertheless, the net effect is the same: not listening.

Take a lesson from the president. Next time someone asks you a set of long, rambling multiple questions about your presentation, reach for your pen, start writing, and confirm what you heard. Or simply pick one of the questions, answer it, and then say, "You had another question." Just as the *Times'* Jeff Zeleny did, your questioner will repeat the question.

Use your brain to think about the question and the answer, and leave the remembering to the rambler.

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## When Did You Stop Beating Your Wife?

*How to Handle False Assumption Questions*

Sooner or later, every human being is confronted with tough questions. One of the toughest and most common is the infamous loaded question “When did you stop beating your wife?” which implies that you have indeed been beating your wife. How do you answer without agreeing with the implication? How do you *not* answer without appearing evasive?

Courtroom dramas often include a scene in which an antagonistic prosecutor points his finger at a defendant and asks accusingly, “Why did you kill your partner?” implying that the person—who has pleaded *not* guilty—did kill the partner. Or “What did you do with the gun?” implying that the person did possess the murder weapon.

This is known as a false assumption, and the only way handle such a question is to apply the noted antidrug slogan championed by Nancy Reagan: Just say, “No!”

The defendant should say, “I did not kill my partner.” The businessperson should deny the false assumption. And if anyone ever asks you when you stopped beating your wife, simply rebut the fallacy by saying, “I never started.”

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell is an excellent speaker and a master at handling tough questions. One of his most challenging Q&A sessions came at a press conference he held shortly after the start of the Iraq war. A Lebanese journalist asked him:

*Mr. Secretary, a lot of fears have been made about who is next. And some people believed to be close with the administration said that the regimes backing Cairo and in Saudi Arabia should be nervous right now. How do you address that point? And does the U.S. have a plan to spread a set of values at gunpoint, in your view, at this point? (F67.1)*

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“... a plan to spread a set of values at gunpoint ....” This question accused the United States of acting as a villainous bully, and Mr. Powell could not give credence to this charge. When he retook the floor, he immediately countered the accusation: “No, of course not.”

Neither Colin Powell, nor you, nor *any* presenter is under *any* obligation to respond to a wrongful accusation in *any* other way than with a complete refutation. If you are attacked with a question that contains or implies an inaccuracy, do as Mr. Powell did. Say, “No.”

Or do as Barack Obama did in his first press conference that took place less than a month after he took office. With the financial crisis weighing heavily on the nation, the media honeymoon of his election victory and inauguration ceremonies ended abruptly: 3 of the 13 questions asked by the reporters in that session were false assumptions.

The first was from Associated Press reporter Jennifer Loven, who began by referring to Mr. Obama's statement earlier that same day that the economic crisis might be irreversible, and then asked him, “Do you think that you risk losing some credibility or even talking down the economy by using dire language like that?”

Mr. Obama's first four words were, “No, no, no, no.”

Caren Bohan of Reuters then asked, “Did you underestimate how hard it would be to change the way Washington worked?”

The president replied, “I don't think I underestimated it. I don't think the American people underestimated it.”

Chip Reid of CBS News asked the third false assumption question: “You talked about that if your plan works the way you want it to work, it's going to increase consumer spending. But isn't consumer spending, or overspending, how we got into this mess? And if people get money back into their pockets, do you not want them saving it or paying down debt first, before they start spending money into the economy?”

Mr. Obama said “no” again. “Well, first of all, I don't think it's accurate to say that consumer spending got us into this mess. What got us into this mess initially were banks taking exorbitant, wild risks with other people's monies, based on shaky assets.” (F67.2)

In each case, the president demonstrated his trademark cool demeanor, contradicting his interrogator and then moving on to correct the fallacy by stating his own position on the given issue.

The next time someone asks you a false assumption question, follow Colin Powell and Barack Obama's examples and take Nancy Reagan's slogan just say “No!”

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## Madoff and Cramer Plead Guilty

### *How to Respond When Guilty as Charged*

In an ironic coincidence, two prominent public figures pleaded guilty on the same day in March 2009: Bernie Madoff to a judge, and Jim Cramer to Jon Stewart. Mr. Madoff, caught red-handed on 11 felony counts of swindling stocks, had to confess; Mr. Cramer, caught red-handed of hyping stocks, did not. Hyperbole is not a crime—yet. But if Mr. Cramer's admissions were an effort to tell the public that he intended no malice, he could have done so more positively. Instead, he withered in the line of Mr. Stewart's fire.

Jim Cramer certainly had the wherewithal to stand up for himself in a contentious exchange, such as his appearance on *The Daily Show* (F68.1) was sure to be. As a Harvard-trained attorney (including a stint as a research assistant to the famously contentious Alan Dershowitz) and as a seasoned television professional, Mr. Cramer surely knew a thing or two about handling tough questions. Moreover, Mr. Stewart's questions were not surprising—he had spent the three prior episodes that week trashing Mr. Cramer and CNBC. *USA Today* (F68.2) had touted Mr. Cramer's appearance with a banner headline, and *Business Week* (F68.3) had called it the “week-long match of the century.” Mr. Stewart himself previewed the encounter as a “battle between a man who makes people laugh for a living and whatever people think I do.”

Yet when Jim Cramer took his place in the hot seat, he capitulated completely. As Jon Stewart repeatedly berated him, Mr. Cramer repeatedly agreed, saying, “Okay,” or “You're right,” or offering *shoulda'*, *woulda'*, *coulda'* replies. And when not agreeing with Mr. Stewart's charges, Mr. Cramer shifted the blame to “the regulators” or to the “lying CEOs.”

Worse still was Mr. Cramer's presentation. On his own CNBC show, *Mad Money*, he usually stomps around the set shouting loudly and waving his arms wildly. Seated across from Mr. Stewart, Mr. Cramer spent most of his time docilely nodding his head in agreement or shrugging his shoulders, his arms splayed open in submission.

Did Jim Cramer prepare himself, as anyone with a modicum of experience with tough Q&A sessions would? Did he anticipate a list of the worst-case questions? In fact, before Mr. Cramer came onstage, Mr. Stewart performed his own mock preparation session: responding to shouted questions from off-screen voices while seated against a bare brick wall, under the glare of a naked light bulb.

What could Jim Cramer have been thinking? If he wanted to make amends to the public he had misled, he could have done so on his own turf, to his own unseen and unheard audience. Instead, he went into the lion's den and submitted to a scathing dressing-down from Mr. Stewart.

Even Jon Stewart was perplexed. In his closing remarks, he turned to the camera and said, “I hope that was as uncomfortable to watch as it was to do.”

We all make missteps or mistakes at some point in our careers. If those mistakes are similar to those of Messrs. Madoff and Cramer, they are matters of accountability and are beyond repair. If they are honest mistakes, here is how to handle them: Take a lesson from Jon Stewart's mock grilling. Prepare a list of tough questions about your blunder and have a colleague or colleagues fire them at you in a practice session. In your answers, be completely honest and admit your responsibility, but then promptly go beyond your admission and offer what corrections you have made or will make. Give more weight to your corrections than to your admissions. Repeat the mock grilling until you become fluent and succinct. By the time you step into the real Q&A session, unlike Jim Cramer, *you will present a positive image.*

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