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Marketing WATCH

California public relations guru has something to teach reporters



Dina Bunn

Sometimes, all anyone wants in life is to be understood.

A new book landed on my desk recently — *Spin: How To Turn The Power Of The Press To Your Advantage* (Regnery Publishing Inc.,

\$24.95). I did my normal cursory flip through the pages before chucking it, until the chapter *Inside a Reporter's Head* stopped me.

If anyone understands the media, it's author **Michael Sitrick**, aka the Wizard of Spin, or The Spinmeister.

His Los Angeles public relations agency, **Sitrick and Co. Inc.**, helped Orange County, Calif., navigate through its bankruptcy storm. When Food Lion Inc. took ABC to court over a negative investigative story, Sitrick helped the grocery chain battle the network in the court of public opinion.

He's a man that corporate CEOs, millionaires and celebrities turn to, to turn bad publicity into good.

A reporter might be leery of a public relations pro like Sitrick, whose high-powered firm of 30 handles some 150 clients a year — clients who can shell out roughly \$400 an hour for his services.

No reporter likes the feeling he is being "spun," but Sitrick argues he does not twist facts or manipulate the truth. One of the commandments at his agency is "thou shalt not lie."

"Call me a flak. Call me a spin doctor," Sitrick said in a telephone interview from his office. "But I'm going to present you with information and document to you what I'm saying. Reporters are smart

60 Minutes calls, what do you do?
Put them on hold and call Michael Sitrick.

SPIN

How to turn the power of the press to your advantage

By the man the L.A. Times calls "The Wizard of Spin"

MICHAEL S. SITRICK
with ALLAN MAYER

Michael Sitrick's book is based on the premise that baloney doesn't cut it with the media.

enough to see through the BS. We make sure we have the evidence to back up what we say."

It's all in the presentation.

"Every reporter, when he or she writes a story, has to interpret what the significant facts are that make the story and how that story is

going to play," Sitrick said. "That's no different from what a spin is going to be. Public relations uses spin. We say these facts are more relevant than those facts."

A California newspaper runs a story about a man finding a frog in his taco at a local restaurant. The restaurant calls Sitrick in a panic.

Sitrick's people investigate and churn out more information for the media. It turns out the man once declared bankruptcy and is wanted by police in Utah for credit card fraud. Sitrick's agency tips reporters to a former woman friend of the man's who tells them he often spoke "about how finding a roach or piece of glass in his food would be a great way to make money."

The restaurant chain is vindicated after the rest of the facts are presented.

Sitrick's book is full of examples about restoring reputations and saving companies from financial ruin. But what I liked most was his dead-on explanations of how reporters think and work.

He's got us pegged. We want the "story." We want to beat our rivals to the story. We want to "own" the story. We want recognition, mostly a pat on the back from our editors or producers.

Sitrick defines the story. He explains deadlines. He communicates what reporters want.

His understanding comes from a career that included stints as a reporter before moving into public relations. He did corporate PR then switched to the agency side and eventually started his own firm.

Sitrick likes to hire former reporters, more so than public relations people, because "it's easier to teach journalists what PR is, than it is to teach PR people what news is."

He co-wrote the book with journalist **Allan Meyer**. Sitrick originally thought it might be a good textbook for students of public relations, but the publisher convinced Sitrick it had a broader appeal. I agree. It's a good read for reporters as well as the people who have to deal with them.