



**Interview with Sabrina Horn, author  
“Make It, Don’t Fake It.”**

**For podcast release  
Monday, July 12, 2021**

KENNEALLY: Sincerity, said Groucho Marx, is the secret to success. If you can fake that, then you’ve got it made.

Welcome Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series, I’m Christopher Kenneally, for Velocity of Content.

From entertainments to entertainers, the ironclad rule for business achievement has long been faking it until you’re making it. In a new book that is part memoir and part business playbook, Sabrina Horn turns the adage upside down. Make it, don’t fake it, she counsels us. A guide to authenticity in communications, Horn’s book lays out the spectrum of lies, from useful and harmless to gaslighting, then builds a case for getting your story straight and sticking to it.

Sabrina Horn founded Horn Group, a public relations firm that for a quarter century advised thousands of executives and their companies, from the hottest startups to the Fortune 500. She was one of only a few female CEOs in Silicon Valley in the early 1990s. In 2015, Horn oversaw her firm’s successful acquisition by Finn Partners, a global marketing company. Today Sabrina Horn is CEO of Horn Strategies, a consultancy focused on helping entrepreneurs and CEOs navigate the early stages of their business. She joins me now from Long Island. Welcome to the program, Sabrina Horn.

HORN: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Chris, it’s great to be here.

KENNEALLY: We are very happy you can join us, and looking forward to a discussion that I think really does come at the right moment in business, and that is to make this choice that you suggest we need to make between making it and faking it. I want to ask you to describe what that choice has meant to you, and why we should all do as you have done.

HORN: Yes, well, I think that’s a great place to start. You want to be successful in business, right? That’s everybody’s goal. And the issue with fake it until you make it is that it has mutated from something that was an innocent tongue-in-cheek little quip to something that’s crossed the line and has become like air. It’s been baked into our society. And people just basically feel that they now have the permission to follow the advice and lie in order to achieve success. And the issue with that is that ultimately the truth always comes out. You might



achieve a little bit of success in the short term, but ultimately if you lie about what your product can do, your customers will find out, or your investors will do their due diligence, or your employers will do their reference checks on your resume. And when the truth is exposed, then you will set yourself back and sabotage your success.

So that's no way to run a business, in my view. It's no way to run a successful long term company. So I wrote this book to put a pin in it, and reverse that trend.

KENNEALLY: Well, good luck with reversing that trend because you're up against, as you say, a history of faking it rather than making it. I suppose I have to ask you, haven't we all faked it at some point in our lives, in our careers, in our personal relationships? And isn't acting as if, somehow, an appropriate counterbalance to the fears so many have of falling prey to the imposter syndrome?

HORN: Yeah. It's a really good point. Acting as if is wonderful medicine against imposter syndrome. So are things like visualization, self-actualization, power posing, dressing for success. These are all very innocent ways of "faking it," to help you improve yourself. But again, you cross the line into the bad ways of faking it that are now so commonplace when you do or say things at other people's expense for personal gain. That's the distinction.

KENNEALLY: And why is this really ethical choice so important to you as a woman who built her own company and is working on advising other businesses as they build their own.

HORN: Yeah. So it really comes down to leadership. You want to set a good example for others as a leader. Otherwise you breed a culture of fakery. It's not a sustainable endeavor. Similarly you can't, in good conscience, give your clients or your customers bad advice that will ultimately not help them. That's not right. So you're going to lose your business that way, because they're going to fail, and word gets out, and your reputation is sunk.

So I've faked it plenty of times. I didn't know what I was doing, I was a 29 year old CEO, I had no leadership experience, I had four years of job working experience, and I didn't know what I was doing sometimes. I was completely overwhelmed. But you learn by making those mistakes, and then you correct them the next time, and you see it through your clients' eyes, as well. So it was quite an education.

KENNEALLY: Well, now, wait a minute, listeners, viewers might be thinking, you work in PR. Isn't spin kind of second cousin to faking it?

HORN: Yeah, so that is quite the unusual perch from which I should be speaking about integrity. So spin is like a four letter word in my business, and actually the best PR is not about spin. The best public relations is always about getting to the truth, understanding it, peeling back



that onion, dealing with it, and then finding a path forward. The best PR is about risk assessment and seeing what threats and opportunities are there, and then navigating your way ahead. It's always grounded in the truth, and the best leadership is always about the truth, too.

The common misperception about PR is spin, but it actually couldn't be further than the truth. (sic)

KENNEALLY: From your perspective, from the public relations profession, give us some best practices for getting to the truth. How do we do that? It sounds like we're in a sort of manners school, but we're not talking about good manners, we're not talking about being good, we're talking about truth, as far as the business of life is concerned, right?

HORN: Right. Look, getting to the truth, sometimes it's not about having all the answers, it's about having all the questions. For a leader to be humble enough to say, we don't really have all the facts here, but we're going to get to the bottom of it, and this is what we're going to do, and then we'll find a path forward and we will inform you of what that path is. Getting to the truth is asking questions, it's admitting when you've made a mistake. It's also about organizing risk and disarming your fear because sometimes the truth can be very harsh and very hard to face. That's why sometimes cheating and cutting those corners is easier. I don't know too many entrepreneurs who love dealing with the fact that they have to do a layoff because their company isn't doing well. Or admitting that their numbers are wrong because they weren't stated properly. What entrepreneur looks forward to that? So it's easier said than done to run your business with integrity based on the truth. It's very difficult.

KENNEALLY: We've been talking about the truth, Sabrina Horn, but you also look at lies – this spectrum of lies, an interesting tongue in cheek chart, and it goes from the useful and the harmless all the way over to gaslighting, which unfortunately we've all become very familiar with, particularly in the political realm. So talk about lies as a contrast to the kind of truth-telling that you're hoping we all do.

HORN: I came up – when I was writing this book I was thinking about all the different ways that people fake it, from the innocent to the criminal. I had to put it in buckets, and so I created this continuum called the Fake-O-Meter. On one end is acting as if, which we talked about earlier, little white lies when your spouse makes you a dinner that doesn't taste so good, and you still say, oh, honey, it was good, no harm no foul. But you cross the line again into faking it when you are exaggerating the truth, minimizing reality.

One of the worst forms of lying is selective truth-telling, where you're actually telling the truth, but you're omitting certain facts. This was the case in the Boeing MAX aircraft disaster.



Other forms of faking it don't involve lying, but I call them ostrich lies because like the ostrich, you stick your head in the sand and pretend that the problem is just going to go away because you can't deal with it. That's also faking it because you're not dealing with reality.

And then off the deep end, off the charts we have gaslighting and outright deception and fraud, which we saw from folks like Bernie Madoff and Elizabeth Holmes and, unfortunately, countless others.

KENNEALLY: You've had to deal with this challenge, as you said earlier, about telling the truth, even when it's uncomfortable. Because after Hurricane Sandy hit New York City in 2012, you happened to discover that agency employee had engaged in embezzlement. I would appreciate if you could tell us how you felt then, and why you choose to draw boundaries around how that story would be told. Why was that authentic, this kind of putting within its own perimeters.

HORN: First of all, that was super hard to write about after having lived through it. You live through something like that, you don't need to write about it and live through it again. But I did for the purpose of telling the story and making a few points about it. I felt terrible. I felt every emotion you could possibly put a finger on, from anger to sadness to being embarrassed and ashamed that this happened on my watch.

So the process that I went through, I guess, is what you're asking to tell the story. I first had to see what we were legally obligated to do. If we were a publicly traded company, I would have had to disclose it. But we are closely privately held company, and so that's not a requirement. So with my attorney's blessings, I then had to decide within my business what was the best thing for the business to do. Would it be in the best interest of my clients and my employees to know about this? Was it materially affecting them in any personal or financial way? And the answers were all no. So then knowing that, I deducted (sic) that it would be OK if I didn't disclose that it would actually hurt the business much more so than no one really knowing about this information. I, of course, shared it with my board and my advisors and my leadership team, my equity business partners, but handled the matter quietly and privately. That was within the confines of the truth the right way to handle it and the best way for the business for me have it handled for the business that way.

So that's the story on that little crisis.

KENNEALLY: It's a crisis that I think we can all sympathize with. You've been sort of outlining for us in pieces, Sabrina Horn, a kind of rules of thumb for truth-telling in a crisis. Add a few more to that list because it's all about telling the truth, it's all about owning it. But then you also have a responsibility as a leader, as a communicator to explain what's happened, right?



HORN: Yeah, right. Well, the sad reality of it is that we have to be prepared for crises these days. There are more crises happening every day that entrepreneurs and CEOs are not prepared to deal with. I highly recommend developing different scenarios and contingency plans for the unimaginable because what do we know about the last year? We never thought that would happen.

So having said that, there are some rules of thumb. First of all, never say or do anything you do not know to be the absolute truth. Bad information – I said this in the book – bad information is like squeezed toothpaste, you can't put it back in the tube.

Next, if you did make a mistake and it's on your watch, you do have to admit it and publicly disclose it, particularly if you have shareholders and you have to state what happened, what's being done about it, and provide a path forward.

Next, never give false hope and never make predictions.

Appoint only one spokesperson to make sure you are delivering a consistent message.

And then lastly – there's many here, but that last one is important – in times of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, it's critical to overcommunicate, even if you are repeating the same messages and the same points, people have a thirst and a hunger for information. It's just like if you're waiting for your flight and it's delayed, you just want to know, even it's the same update.

So those would be some key rules of thumb for leaders in crises.

KENNEALLY: And that point you just made, Sabrina, about hitting the same points over and over because some of the audiences haven't heard you before, so it's important to be doing that. We saw that during the height of the pandemic. Many of the civic leaders, governors, mayors and others got on the television every day and said wear a mask, wash your hands, keep distance, that kind of thing. We all heard it but it mattered that we had to hear it over and over.

HORN: Over and over again, yes.

KENNEALLY: And what this finally comes down to, and I really appreciate your talking about, Sabrina Horn, is values. Again, we're not talking about the values we might learn in Sunday school, we're talking about values for our relationships, for our businesses, for our civic interactions. And why are values so important?

HORN: You cannot build a sustainable anything – a sustainable business or relationship, marriage, based on lies. You have to have a basis for integrity and the truth. The issue is that the truth builds trust, and trust is the essence of every enduring brand. If you tell the truth, you learn



to trust it and you deliver a consistent customer experience. You break that trust when you either veer from your core values or you slipped up and maybe you weren't telling exactly the truth or left some facts out. So core values are the basis for everything – for your culture, how you treat your people, your business processes, how you treat your customers, and all of that radiates out through your brand. It is essential.

KENNEALLY: Sabrina Horn, thanks for sharing your thought with us, and congratulations on your new book. It's a pleasure to have you on our program today.

HORN: Thank you so much, Chris, I loved being here. Thank you.

KENNEALLY: aOur co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for watching and listening and join us again soon on another episode of Velocity of Content.

END OF FILE