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Curtis Sparrer is ‘politely pushy’ to cut through the noise of the daily news cycle

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When Texas’ law banning most abortions took effect in September, Curtis Sparrer, a Dallas native, decided he had to speak out against it.

The principal and co-founder of Bospar PR, and an openly gay man, said he knows what it’s like to grow up in a conservative region and face discrimination based on who he is. “LGBTQ rights have always had a component that was tied to the freedom of choice and the right to your own body. And so I feel very passionate about this,” he said. Not one to go under the radar, Sparrer spoke with his team — Bospar is a remote firm with some employees based in Texas — and heard that some in Texas were wanting to leave after the bill’s passage. He announced the next day that his company would financially assist anyone wanting to relocate.



LIPO CHING | SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

Curtis Sparrer is principal and co-founder of Bospar PR.

I spoke with Sparrer about this announcement, his background in television and how he led Bospar’s growth during the pandemic.

How did you get into PR? I had to make a choice in 2008 about whether to stay in San Francisco or stay in journalism. I talked to David Perry who I worked with for several different initiatives, and he said I should consider tech PR.

The first interviews I had were not that nice. One big PR firm said, “I just don’t think you have what it takes to be in PR.” An executive at a certain agency said, “I don’t think you’re meant for broadcast PR either.” And, I have an Emmy [laughs].

I ignored that and applied for an internship with this woman Chris Boehlke. This was when same sex marriage was reaching a breaking point, and she calls me and says f--- the internship, I want to get married, not “gay marry” but I want to commit — and she was my only offer. Today, she’s is my business partner.

You started as a TV producer. How does that skill set translate into building narratives about the companies you work with? In TV, your whole thought is, make a decision even if it’s a bad one. It’s better than not making a decision.

The other thing is writing quickly and servicing the egos of anchors. For my client-facing part where I had to appease anchors, I then appeased clients. At my first agency, everyone was turning themselves into pretzels to say no to clients and it’s just easier to say yes and think of some way I’d make it happen. And while other people didn’t seem to have this urgency that a TV producer has, I had urgency in spades so I was getting things done quickly.

What are the unique challenges of working with tech companies? The hardest thing is that they are esoteric. You can’t see them, they’re not physical. So when you’re telling a story, you have to talk about the conceptual way something will work. Some things are easier than others, like when I was representing an AI client that men would flirt with, I could say it’s worse than #metoo, it’s robots too. And it shows how lifelike it is.

When I pitch a journalist a story, I try to put it in a big trend. Then it became clear to me that I didn’t have the details and I would use other research but those documents were dated. So I thought, let’s

commission our own research. For example, we asked people in the same company: Where are you going to shop online on your phone? And we asked them that at a funeral, and discovered New Yorkers were more likely than anyone else in the country to shop on their phones during funerals.

Doing that helps a brand come alive because you can't just talk about how awesome you are, you have to talk about how you touch humanity.

Speak to your work on the Texas exodus initiative? I'm from Dallas, Texas, and when I was about 10, I wrote a letter to the Dallas Times Herald. I said that I felt that the tactics used by religious right were evocative of fascist tactics of intimidation by the Nazis.

When I went to school at UT Austin, a lecture I attended was by Sarah Weddington, who won Roe vs. Wade. LGBTQ rights have always had a component that was tied to the freedom of choice and the right to your own body. And so I feel very passionate about this.

When this happened, I watched Gov. [Greg] Abbott brazenly position his decision as good for business. I listened to NPR and they said, why aren't more companies speaking out about this? I asked our executive team, what can we do? Some of our staff in Texas were looking to move and I said, why don't we offer them a package? So we announced the policy.

We made our announcement, and then Marc Benioff tweeted that he would do something similar. *[Editor's note: Sparrer says no employees have taken him up on the offer yet.]*

Did he give you credit? No, absolutely no credit. But we had one woman saying she was trying to side between us and a bigger firm, and she went with us because she liked our values more.

Growing up in Texas as a gay man, it was important for gay people speak out, but it felt even better when somebody who wasn't gay would say, this is important to me.

Do you expect other companies to come out and say that this law isn't good for business? There has not been the economic reckoning that is going to happen. My prediction is that it's going

to become increasingly hard for companies to recruit. If I was in my 20s, I wouldn't want to move to Texas.

The L.A. Times called you a crisis management expert. How do you handle crises? The best crises are the ones you never hear about.

Everyone loses their head. But I think the most important thing to do is to consider your humanity and the demonstration of humanity to others. I say this because every time Facebook does something wrong, there's no culpability. Executives that are able to show empathy and apologize for their screw ups are going to be treated a lot better, not just by the media, but by the business community.

Bospar made our list of fastest-growing private companies. How did you grow during the pandemic? We've been working from home since we started. At first people were suspicious — I lost one prospective client because he said people need to collaborate by the water cooler. But when the lockdown happened, everyone started working like we did. So in the time it would take to win one client the traditional way, we could win five.

We also created our list of values and one that bubbles to the top is politely pushy. That's the idea that in PR, there is so much out there and only if you're being persistent can you cut through.

What would you go back and tell your 21-year-old self? I'd say don't wear puka shells [laughs].

I would have told him to be less obnoxious. I think that comes from a sense of powerlessness that I had growing up in Texas, where if I didn't stand out as a gay guy, I'd be ignored. But that could very well be the seed of any good PR practitioner.

How did you get your Emmy? I was a TV producer at KRON4 in San Francisco, and the Emmy was for outstanding daily news. It was for our coverage that day involving Scott Peterson, of course.

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