The Backchannel

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Abstract

Book Review: The Backchannel, by Cliff Atkinson.

Book Review

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Book Title
The Backchannel

Author
Cliff Atkinson

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Summary

In contrast to the thousands of teachers chastising students for texting or tweeting during class, communicators and presenters across the globe are now considering encouraging audience members to tweet and have discussions during presentations. The Backchannel, written by writer, keynote speaker and consultant Cliff Atkinson, analyzes the rules for navigating the backchannel in a professional environment.

Initially, this book peaked my curiosity because of its unique tagline – "How Audiences are using Twitter and Social Media and Changing Presentations Forever." As an agricultural communicator, I research and examine the use of social media in a marketing or social context, so it seems only logical to connect these tools to an educational or presentation-centered environment. Flipping through the book's pages showcased a spectrum of colors and illustrative graphics, which only furthered my interest to delve into the content.

As suggested by the book's title, the content focuses on best practices for using a "backchannel," which the author defines as "a line of communication created by people in an audience to connect with other outside or inside the room, with or without the knowledge of the speaker at the front of the room" (p. 17). Although Atkinson does recognize that a backchannel can manifest itself in many forms of interpersonal communication, he does primarily focus on forms rooted in some sort of online or electronic forum.

The first two chapters are integrated with a fairly elaborate anecdote from a discussion panel gone sour at the 2009 South by Southwest Interactive Festival in Austin, Texas. The story details accounts of the presentation from a discussion panel member, the discussion facilitator, and an audience member chronicling her thoughts of the discussion on Twitter. Eventually, the audience member becomes critical of the previously mentioned discussion panel member in her tweets, and because that panel member is monitoring the conference hashtag, a confrontation and discussion ensues

regarding the appropriateness of the backchannel in a presentation setting.

Following the conclusion of the narrative, the author pulls back and examines the foundation for facilitating or participating in a backchannel. Though Atkinson primarily addresses Twitter as his tool of choice for communicating in a backchannel, he also discusses some drawbacks to the platform and suggests some alternate programs, including chat rooms, to host discussions before, during, and after a presentation. The author provides a helpful chart on page 36 that provides suggestions for how to choose the best backchannel tool. Also included is basically an instruction guide for how to set up and manage a twitter account, as well as tips for using the platform to monitor backchannel conversations, including third-party applications.

The next two chapters are devoted to examining the positives and negatives that can accompany the use of a backchannel and there are several mental models and graphics provided to help illustrate discussion points. Here, the author overviews many basic techniques and styles currently used by communicators and educators. It is in these two chapters that Atkinson introduces the "Two Feet Rule." Atkinson suggests implementing this rule in conferences to encourage participant engagement. Basically, it states that if an audience member is unsatisfied with a presentation, he or she can use his or her own "two feet" to go join another session. Likewise, someone monitoring conference backchannels may simply choose to join another session audience members are positively reviewing via the backchannel.

The final four chapters of the book are what I would consider the real "meat." Atkinson provides helpful information on how to best prepare for a presentation utilizing the backchannel. Suggestions include making sure you make it easy for audience members to find information related to your presentation on your website and helping to facilitate a backchannel before, during, and after your presentation. As the author of another book on making good presentations, Atkinson does not miss an opportunity to promote his other publication in this book. He integrates material related to his other publication, including tips on how to design and give a presentation, with his suggestions for planning backchannel information.

Worksheets are even provided in the book's appendices to facilitate preparation using Atkinson's "Four Tweet Rule," where the presenter would formulate four tweets ahead of time – a summary tweet as well as three main point tweets from separate sections in the presentation material. The presenter could then integrate the four tweets into his or her presentation to hopefully increase audience understanding and engagement. Additionally, a large portion of the final chapter is devoted to handling instant feedback from audience participants, as well as how to manage potentially unruly participant tweets. Several practice scenarios are provided, without any sort of "answer key," to help readers practice reactions in these improvisational backchannel situations.

As a trained communicator, I experienced mixed reactions to the content in this book. For someone working in an industry unrelated to education or communications, the first half of the book would be instructional, interesting, and informative in nature. However, because I was coming from a perspective having already mastered the basics of Twitter, these sections were elementary and somewhat uninteresting. However, the second half of the book really provided more of the content I was hoping to read. Though it is strange to actually encourage audience members in a conference presentation to pull out their smartphones to hold side conversations, I know it is a reality that presenters, communicators, and even teachers to some degree must be ready to embrace. In this book, Atkinson provides some insightful suggestions for how to best prepare for a presentation while encouraging use of a backchannel. By utilizing his four tweets method, a presenter can help audience members understand and retain presentation information.

Book Review

The only major issue I had with the book was that two interesting appendix items – "Negotiating a Backchannel Agreement" and "How Open Space Transforms Meetings" are repeatedly referenced as being available at the end of the book. However, when I tried to find these materials, they simply do not exist. After scouring, I finally found that these are considered "bonus content" and can only be found in the web appendix for the book. Though I do see the value in providing bonus content to readers online and driving readers to a book's website, the only place I could find that mentioned these materials were only available online was at the bottom of a four-page table of contents, which as a reader, I typically only skim in favor of diving into the text. For the longest time, I thought my copy of the book was simply missing content. I don't think it is good practice not to include materials that have been explicitly referenced.

Overall, Atkinson's book is a valuable read for anyone who might be presenting or attending any sort of conference presentation. The author works to provide information for both novice and experienced presenters and users. Though most of the concepts presented are illustrated in the setting of some sort of technologically-friendly conference, the principles presented here would be great for any sort of presentation, whether it be to stakeholders, a board of directors, or even students. Teachers open to embracing a backchannel in the classroom could use the suggestions presented to enhance the learning experience. The concepts discussed in this book are only going to become more useful as the social media culture grows and evolves in the future.