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THE ACTIVIST'S MEDIA HANDBOOK **Lessons From 50 Years as a Progressive Agitator**

David Fenton, “the Robin Hood of Public Relations,” On Adventures With Nelson Mandela, Al Gore, Fidel Castro, Richard Branson, Bruce Springsteen, John and Yoko, Meryl Streep, Bryan Stevenson, Rolling Stone, Abbie Hoffman, George Soros and Well-Known Activists

New Book Lays Out How Progressives Lost the Message Wars and How They Can Win Again, Especially on Climate Change

In 1982, long-haired, pot-smoking hippie activist David Fenton founded Fenton, the first public relations firm dedicated solely to progressive social change. In his new combination rollercoaster memoir and practical guide for communicators, he tells candid stories of helping movements, politicians and celebrities working for the environment, human rights, and social justice.

Using concrete examples from his half-century career, Fenton lays out 12 principles of activist communications, urging Democrats and progressives to utilize them to help reverse conservative messaging dominance. He also critiques “woke” language on the left for violating principle #1 — “craft simple messages everyone can understand.”

Fenton got his start as a high-school dropout in the late 1960s, photographing tear gas, riots and rock stars for anti-war, counter-cultural “underground” newspapers. He crossed over into activist public relations in the 70s, first in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as part of a hippie activist commune active in the early marijuana legalization movement. Yippie Abbie Hoffman was his first PR Professor. After becoming the head of PR for Rolling Stone magazine, he co-produced the 1979 No-Nukes Concerts at Madison Square Garden with Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, Gil Scott-Heron, Bonnie Raitt, Chaka Khan, Carly Simon, James Taylor, the Doobie Brothers and many others.

Founding Fenton to counter the growing influence of corporate public relations, he recounts his firm’s early campaigns to overthrow apartheid, reverse the nuclear arms race, oppose racist drug laws and mass incarceration, save endangered species and reduce toxic pesticide exposure. Fenton’s 1989 campaign for NRDC successfully banning the pesticide alar in apples earned him the enmity of the right, which continues today. His firm also played an important role in early digital advocacy, including the building of MoveOn.org.

Fenton worked closely with Al Gore on climate change — ultimately selling his firm in 2015 to work on climate survival full-time. The book includes a candid portrait of Gore, and a chapter devoted to what Fenton calls “Climate Change: A Communications Failure.” Among David Fenton’s most recent climate work is the campaign to vastly reduce Bitcoin’s energy use, www.cleanupbitcoin.com, and efforts to win more Republicans to the climate cause.

The Activist’s Media Handbook includes over 150 photographs, graphics and examples of iconic activist advertising produced by Fenton over the decades, including the infamous “General Betray-Us” ad accusing General David Petraeus of distorting the Iraq war. This ad was formally censured by both houses of Congress, an historic first.

Fenton’s career spans the modern history of the American left. Yet his book cautions against the sectarianism, ideological rigidity, excessive identity politics, cancel-culture and divisiveness which characterizes too much of the left today. Using linguistics and cognitive science, he explains, for example, how the public hears slogans like “defund the police” as “you don’t want any police to protect me.” Such cluelessness is a gift to the right and its campaign against democracy in America. (The book’s introduction is by famed linguist George Lakoff).

The Activist’s Media Handbook also lays out concrete proposals for how to rein in the cancerous disinformation intentionally spread by Fox “News” and on social media. “You can have a democracy, or you can have completely unregulated social media, but you can’t have both,” he writes.

From working directly with Nelson Mandela on his first U.S. tour and 1994 Presidential campaign in South Africa, convincing Fidel Castro to ditch his green army uniform, exposing CIA crimes in Central America, helping to save swordfish and the spotted owl from extinction, helping Yoko Ono and Sean Lennon ban fracking in New York State, arranging fugitive Abbie Hoffman’s return from years underground, staging the 1975 “Win a Pound of Colombian Marijuana” contest, Fenton tells a rollicking good tale with clear lessons for the next generation of activists.

The National Journal called David Fenton “*the Robin Hood of public relations*” for using the tactics of big-money corporate pr for nonprofit public interest groups. PR Week named him on the 100 most influential PR people. In praising his book, Jane Fonda says “*Fenton has helped progressive activists reach the media and public since the late 1960s. In the struggles against apartheid, the nuclear arms race, unjust wars, racist drug laws, to stop climate and toxic pollution, his work has helped movements advance justice.*”

“Any student of American history in the last half-century will profit from this inside account--and anyone trying to make change now will profit from grappling with these hard-earned lessons,” writes author and activist Bill McKibben.

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE ACTIVIST'S MEDIA HANDBOOK

David Fenton has helped progressive activists reach the media and public since the late 1960s. In the struggles against apartheid, the nuclear arms race, unjust wars, racist drug laws, to stop climate and toxic pollution, his work has helped movements advance justice.” – **Jane Fonda**, actor and activist

“Activists need to be communicators and story-tellers. David Fenton knows this at his core and has helped the environmental and climate movement reach the public for decades.” – **Mark Ruffalo**, actor and activist

“The service rendered to the African National Congress by Fenton Communications during the difficult years, has been of great value to us. The technical skill of your company, as well as your company’s commitment to worthy causes, is beyond doubt.”
– **Nelson Mandela, June 28, 1994, in a letter to the author**

“David is the progressive world’s chief evangelist on the importance of communications and language in social movements. His help was essential in MoveOn’s campaigns on climate, economic justice, criminal justice reform, and against the nuclear arms race and the Iraq war.” – **Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, co-founders, MoveOn.org**

“David is the dean of progressive communications. As his memoir shows, there is no one who has done more to help the progressive community build public support for its causes through powerful and effective messaging.”
– **Ken Roth, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch**

“I met David in 1970 when we were both teenagers in the movement. I had a clenched fist as a Black Panther. David had a camera that captured my fire and innocence. His memoir is a guide for activists who need to be good storytellers to win.”
– **Jamal Joseph Writer, Director, author of *Panther Baby*, Professor of Film, Columbia University**

“Climate activists too often believe the truth will set us free. Decades of political paralysis have proved that wrong. Fenton lays out key lessons on how to communicate the truth in ways that actually reach and move people - in other words, how to win. Packed with distilled lessons, important history and good storytelling, Fenton’s book is essential reading for anyone on a mission to make change.
– **Annie Leonard, Co-Executive Director, Greenpeace USA, and author of *The Story of Stuff***

“David Fenton has spent decades helping advocates for human rights and social justice reach the public. His emphasis on communicating climate science is essential if we are to preserve an open society — and healthy environment.” — in the face of propaganda, denial and distortion.” – **George Soros**

“Any student of American history in the last half-century will profit from this inside account--and anyone trying to make change now will profit from grappling with these hard-earned lessons.” – **Bill McKibben, author and activist**

“The first step to tackling climate change is to talk about it. David Fenton has been helping scientists and NGOs do this for more than three decades and over that time, he’s learned a lot. This book lays out basic principles of effective climate communication. It’s a must-read for anyone seeking to raise public awareness and encourage climate action.” – **Katharine Hayhoe, Distinguished Professor, Texas Tech University, United Nations Champion of the Earth, author of *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World***

“David Fenton is a social change strategist, magician and performance artist. He's built some of the most effective campaigns across the progressive landscape over the past fifty-plus years - with humor, clarity, moral indignation and a wry sense of the absurd.”
– **Michael Brune, former Executive Director, Sierra Club**