



The Art of Misdirection

By Tony Wu

Digital illustration © Christopher Hart

When is a fact not really a fact? Keep that question in mind while I take you through a little story...

Exhausted from a long journey, three men walk into a motel to get rooms for the night. The clerk says there's only one room left, so unfortunately they'll have to share.

The good news, however, was that the only available room was a suite with three bedrooms available at a special discounted price - only \$30. Delighted with their good fortune, each of the three men paid \$10 and went to get some rest.

Here's the thing though. The clerk was actually a bit of an operator, who figured he could make a quick profit from the three tired men. The suite was in fact only \$25 for the night, so he secretly pocketed the extra \$5.

A few minutes later though, the clerk discovered that he had a conscience. He felt guilty. To relieve his growing anxiety, the clerk decided to give some of the money back. He called to tell the three men that he had made a small mistake. The room was only \$27, not \$30, so the three men went back to the front desk and gratefully received \$1 each from the clerk.

So the three men paid \$9 each, or \$27 in total. The clerk originally kept \$5, but since he gave \$3 back (\$1 each to each of the three men), he only had \$2 left.

So if the men paid \$27, and the clerk kept \$2, that's only \$29.

What happened to the other \$1 out of the original \$30 that the three men paid? Hmmmm...

Misdirection is an interesting thing. It is the art of making people concentrate on the

wrong pieces of information to intentionally lead them to the wrong conclusion.

Magicians use misdirection to entertain, and in the example above, I used it to make you think twice.

There's nothing wrong with misdirection when it's applied this way – for fun and entertainment, or just to make someone think really hard.

Let me highlight another example.

A few years ago, there was public discussion about the topic of seahorses in Singapore. Underwater World Singapore ("UWS"), in a misguided effort to promote the Singapore Food Festival, announced its intention to serve a "sumptuous spread of gastronomic ocean creations such as Neptune Tonic, a Chinese medicinal seahorse wellness soup in cream-based style".

By way of background, many seahorses are highly endangered, and have been protected under international conventions, including the IUCN Red List and CITES. So the first reaction from the local and international diving, conservation and marine sciences communities was shock and horror, which led to a number of e-mails to UWS and the Haw Par group, which owns UWS.

Fortunately, the management of both companies responded quickly, changing their position and explaining that the caterers had set the menu.

OK, fair enough.

The interesting bit, though, is a response from Dr. Giam Choo Hoo to the various letters to the Forum in the national newspaper (the Straits Times) on this issue.

Dr. Giam was the former head of the Primary Production Department ("PPD")

in Singapore, now known as the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore ("AVA"). He was the head of Singapore's CITES delegation while at the PPD, and is currently an alternate member of the Animals Committee at CITES. Of particular interest, he also represented the Shark Fin and Marine Products Association Limited at a recent CITES meeting.

In his letter to the paper, Dr. Giam stated that "The use of the seahorse in traditional medicine, in any form, is permitted, legal and acceptable."

Ah yes, remember the concept of misdirection? Technically speaking, Dr. Giam is correct. It is legal to use seahorses in traditional medicine.

However, (this is the part where you have to watch the magician's hand very closely) what Dr. Giam omitted was the crucial fact that all trade in protected seahorses must specifically meet CITES requirements that such trade will not further endanger the survival of these species in the wild.

"Huh?". Translated to normal language, this means that in real life, trade in protected seahorses is severely restricted, because CITES nations, including Singapore and other Asian countries, jointly reached the decision that many seahorses are highly endangered and need to be protected from excessive use.

So even though "the use of seahorse in traditional medicine" is legal, as Dr. Giam states, most international trade in seahorses is not. If you can't trade, there's not much to use legally. Simple as that.

So to go back to my original question – when is a fact not really a fact? When the fact is as misleading or irrelevant as the "missing" \$1 from the motel. ■