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For professional communicators and reputation managers

With age comes wisdom

Harold Burson on why retirement is the last thing on his mind Page 18



Standard gets serious

The *Evening Standard's* website is changing its focus to news Page 16



Ticket to staff success

Want to retain top agency talent? Send them to work overseas Page 24

'I won't rest until I'm old'

Burson-Marsteller's founder and 'the century's most influential PR figure' is not about to stop now, as **Gemma O'Reilly** discovers

For a man who has been on a fast and furious schedule, Harold Burson is looking remarkably fresh. Factoring in that he is 87, has already had a break-fast meeting and been briefed on his next set of meetings, and it is still only 10am, his appearance is astonishing.

Since his arrival in the UK two days ago, Burson-Marsteller's founding chairman has been in back-to-back meetings from 8am until 8pm each day, organised by a troop he calls his 'baby-sitters'. The main reason for his trip across the pond from his home in New York was the 35th anniversary of the global PR company's Frankfurt office earlier in the week.

Of course, Burson has seen many offices open and close in his 50-year tenure. Last year he attended anniversary parties in the Oslo and Sao Paulo offices, and next month he will make a trip to Asia for the Hong Kong office's 40th celebrations.

'They keep me busy,' he says in his East Coast drawl. 'They think it could be the last time the old buzzard comes to town and they need to squeeze everything they can out of me.'

Burson's wry sense of humour pervades the interview and he peppers it with jokes about his age. 'I guess, when I'm older, I will want to rest. I think that if over the past 20 years I had been at home and not occupied, I wouldn't feel as good as I do. Although I do have the occasional senior moment.'

Softly spoken and considered, it is clear he is a man one would want to have around in a crisis, an area in which the agency has specialised since its inception.

CV

- ◆ **1988** Founding chairman, Burson-Marsteller
- ◆ **1953** CEO, Burson-Marsteller
- ◆ **1946** Founder, Harold Burson PR

Long-time colleague and close friend Bob Leaf, chairman of Robert S Leaf Consultants, says Burson's calmness and intelligence wins over clients and helps to keep the peace in a crisis. 'Because he is so quiet, in meetings in the early days, clients would ask "when's Harold going to arrive?". But he'd have been sitting there all along. He never had any fanfare. He never brags and he is very humble.'

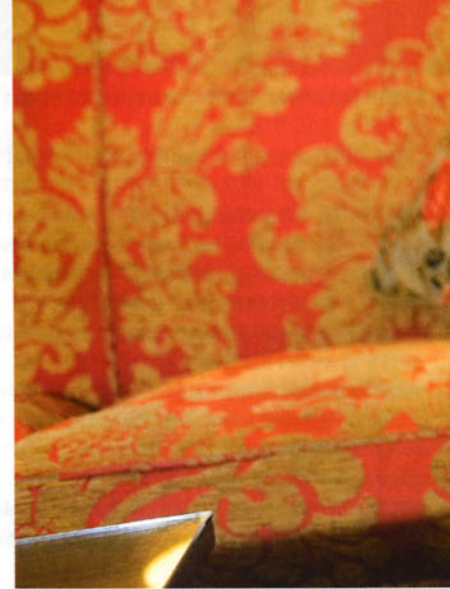
During the agency's history, B-M has come in for criticism over the ethics of some of its clients, which Burson passionately defends. 'We are in the business of helping companies through difficult situations,' he says. He cites the agency's work for Union Carbide Corporate - which was jointly responsible for the Bhopal, India disaster in 1984 that killed 2,000 employees - as a case study of which he is proud: 'We are frequently criticised for this, but I am proud of it, as we helped the media cover the story. We get pilloried, but our job is to work on challenging assignments.'

He is quick to stress the agency would never take a client it thought was operating unlawfully or for rogue countries. 'We use the criteria that we do not want any of our clients to be embarrassed to be on the list with other clients, and we want our employees to feel comfortable.'

Keeping employees happy appears to be at the heart of Burson's mission statement and a reason for the agency's longevity.

Employees across the company still phone him for advice, and on his trips he makes sure he lunches with a dozen new starters at the agency across all levels.

Another long-time friend and PR industry stalwart Professor Tim Traverse-Healy



87 not out Harold Burson puts his continuous

says Burson is a serious figure: 'He is not the sort of person about whom you find funny things, because he is very contained and considered. He is a kind man and very human.' He recalls a time Burson turned up with his wife to a CIPR boat trip to find their room was in the crew's quarters. 'He was horrified by the bunk beds, but never made a fuss and just got on with it.'

There is a sense that while being ambitious, Burson never believed the agency would be as big as it has become.

'The major point of differentiation is we are one company around the world,' he says. 'When we started expanding in 1961, we made a decision not to acquire existing agencies and change the sign on the door. We had started a unique culture. Out of 45



enthusiasm down to his decision to keep working, although he does admit to having the occasional 'senior moment'

worldwide offices, only two are headed by Americans because we hire local staff.'

Highlights of his career include advising most of the US presidents and he counts Ronald Reagan among his friends. 'We would lunch together once a month after he left the White House. He was a very nice man with a great sense of humour.'

With a lifetime of stories and experience, it is clear why Burson is in demand, but he remains unchanged, say friends. 'He might walk a little slower, but he is exactly the same man he was 40 years ago.'

A recent survey by the US edition of *PRWeek* saw Burson described as 'the century's most influential PR figure'.

'I have been around longer than most,' he muses. 'It was the prize for survival.' ◆

HAROLD BURSON'S TURNING POINTS

What was your biggest career break?

It happened in 1940 when I was a reporter for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* covering a story on a large ammunition plant. The owner of the construction company asked if I could get a leave of absence to handle media relations until the crisis subsided. Six months later, I was in New York doing publicity for the company.

What advice would you give to someone climbing the career ladder?

Be well informed about your immediate area of business interest and about what is going on in the world. As my father frequently admonished me: 'Always be in the know.'

Who has been your greatest mentor?

Growing up it was my mother. In high

school it was an English teacher who had oversight for the school newspaper of which I was editor. I've actually learned from many of our clients, too numerous to mention.

What do you prize most in new recruits?

A passion for what they are doing. An ability to write. An ability to work with, and gain the respect of, colleagues.

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