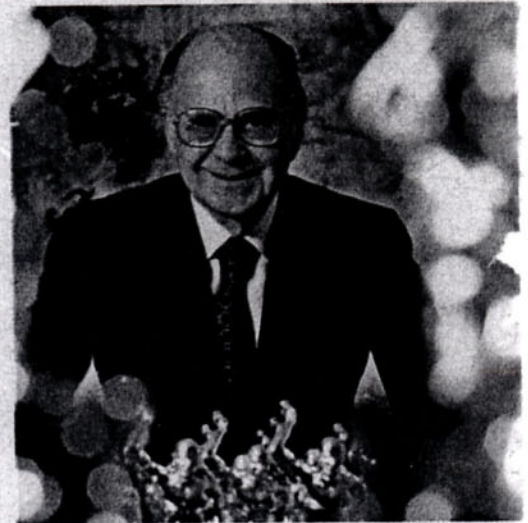


# “Let your good work speak for you”

It's not very often that one gets to meet a legend like Harold Burson, the 80-year-old founder chairman of Burson-Marsteller, the world's largest public relations consultancy. Burson, who started the firm some 50 years ago with advertising executive William Marsteller, was named the century's most influential PR figure by industry journal *PR week*. In 1979 the firm was sold to Young & Rubicam, which was acquired by the WPP group in 2000. Burson's downtown Manhattan office is crammed with memorabilia and photos of the Reagans, his close friends. A portrait of Geoffrey, his white West Highland terrier, guards the entrance.

Although he's no longer in day-to-day charge, the PR doyen puts in practically a full working day, commuting daily from Scarsdale. Burson, who's completing his memoirs, is bullish on India, where the firm ended its association with Roger Pereira Communications and hitched up with Genesis PR. He spoke to *Business India's* Naazneen Karmali on his colourful past and eventful present



**Q** *What role do you play in the firm today?*

**A** There are still a few clients with whom I work on a consulting basis. But my principal role is institutional and ceremonial. It's a lot like being vice-president of the United States — you receive visitors and go to a lot of lunches!

**Q** *You've seen public relations evolve over five decades. How mature is the profession today?*

**A** It's universally accepted by people who manage large institutions in government and in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors that they must develop and nurture relationships with different segments of society. They realise that there is both an art and a science in communicating to people. We don't have to justify the need for our services today.

**Q** *Burson-Marsteller is as American as apple pie. So how did you go about developing your global reach?*

**A** We were a very small company when the common market in Europe came into existence in the 1950s. I was sensitive to the implications of that for two reasons. My father was a voracious reader and very interested in international affairs and that put me on a different wavelength. Also,

I'd spent two years in Europe during World War II, first as a combat engineer and then as a reporter of the American Forces Network, for whom I covered the Nuremberg trials.

Deciding to follow our clients to Europe, we established our first office in Geneva in 1961. This differentiated us since Hill & Knowlton was the only other firm with an international presence. That was the most defining moment in our history.

**Q** *Any other reasons for your success?*

**A** Our people! The apocryphal story is that I let Marsteller own 51 per cent so that I could put my name first. That's not true because there was never any doubt in my mind that my name would go first anyway! Both he and I believed that there should be widely disbursed employee ownership, so we made stock available to our principal employees.

**Q** *Why did you then decide to sell out to Young & Rubicam?*

**A** Two reasons. In the last 10 years of his life Bill Marsteller was handicapped with muscular dystrophy, so his ad agency's profitability was declining and it needed management fixing. Also, the PR business was growing fast but we did not have the capital to finance our expansion. The changed ownership doesn't affect the

business, although there's a much greater interest in profitability and meeting financial objectives, which is a good discipline.

**Q** *What role do you see for your firm in India?*

**A** As the 21st century unfolds, India will become one of the great economies of the world. And we want to be part of that. I hope that our alliance with Genesis PR will lead to a significant financial interest and a much more expanded presence in India. We usually have wholly-owned operations, but we also have a successful joint venture in Canada which can be a model for India.

**Q** *So looking back, what are you most proud of?*

**A** I've been a confidante to CEOs of the world's largest corporations. Our firm has been a training ground for the industry. The heads of communication in 25 of the Fortune 100 companies are from our firm.

**Q** *What would be your advice to people setting up their own firms today?*

**A** People say that we had no competitors when we started, but that's not correct. In 1946 there were 540 PR firms in New York. My advice is: have good clients, do good work, and let it speak for you.