

PUBLIC RELATIONS:

General Writer Gives Way to Specialist

By Robert B. McIntyre

Newsmen considering a switch to the public relations field were cautioned this week that the scribe who can "write about anything" is giving way to the specialist in an expanding technological economy that requires a good deal more than a "surface technical knowledge" to publicize products with an engineering orientation.

"If a newsman is so orientated, then I say, 'Come on in! The water's fine,'" Harold Burson, president, Burson-Marsteller Associates, New York, told EDITOR & PUBLISHER.

Tough Customers

"The 'Help Wanted! Engineers' sign is being flashed today not only by industrial concerns but also by public relations and publicity firms with clients whose products are bought by tough-minded customers such as engineers and production experts," Mr. Burson said.

The advice comes from a man well-qualified to give advice on getting into public relations, for if there is any "secret" to the successful practice of public relations it probably lies in the men who practice it — men like Mr. Burson who left his reporting job on the *Memphis* (Tenn.) *Commercial Appeal* and came to New York in 1941 as PR director for the H. K. Ferguson Co., a firm of industrial engineers and builders.

By so doing, Mr. Burson learned his engineering orientation the hard way — by doing.

"I wasn't particularly well-equipped for public relations work when I started," Mr. Burson admitted. "I had a B. A. degree from the University of Mississippi and a flair for writing which I developed while acting as college news reporter for the *Commercial Appeal*. I joined the paper full-time after I had graduated.



Harold Burson

"But in those days, things were different. The journalist-publicist who could write about anything was quite acceptable. Our economy wasn't based on technology as it is today, and any good reporter who could put a technical subject into everyday English for the reader, was all that was necessary," Mr. Burson said.

He continued: "Adjectives like 'better', 'newer' and 'more economical' no longer impress sophisticated industrial buyers. The mature industrial buyer demands specifications, performance data and other operating characteristics, even in editorial material. The publicist who prepares this kind of copy must be as well equipped to write it as the manufacturer's own sales force — or even better because the industrial publicist talks to a broader audience."

To provide this technical know-how, BMA has on its staff of 60 people, 15 graduate engineers. In addition, the firm also numbers among its technical personnel a graduate physicist and a mathematician who can qualify as a computer specialist.

Mr. Burson explained that this technical staff makes it possible to provide a client with a full range of public relations services that includes technical articles, brochures and booklets for sales and services programs, external house organs, new product introductions, and assistance in the preparation of technical papers for presentation to technical societies.

Financial PR

Concurrent with its growth in the technical publicity field, Burson-Marsteller also has expanded in the field of corporate and financial public relations. This past year, for example, BMA was instrumental in the preparation of annual reports for eight publicly-owned corporations.

"Not only have we equipped ourselves to do a technical publicity job by hiring graduate engineers who can write," Mr. Burson said, "but we have placed equal emphasis on staff members qualified to understand and interpret the balance sheet of a corporation and communicate the company's basic philosophy to shareholders and the business community in general."

This combination of financial and product knowledge makes it possible for BMA to perform what Mr. Burson considers their basic function—helping clients sell their products.

"Public relations," Mr. Burson told E&P, "is no good unless it helps make the client's cash register ring. There is no sense in building a climate for a product unless that climate sells the product."

Mr. Burson said that he first sensed the need for a public relations firm specifically qualified to handle technical and industrial accounts while he was PR director for the Ferguson Co. However, World War II interrupted his career, and it wasn't until 1946, following a hitch in an Army combat engineer group in Europe, that he got a chance to test his theory by starting a one-man business with desk space in a client's office.

Six years later, he met William A. Marsteller who headed the then Marsteller, Gebhardt

and Reed, Inc., which specialized in industrial advertising accounts. The firm which later became Marsteller, Rickard, Gebhardt and Reed officially changes its name to Marsteller Inc. on Nov. 1. Mr. Marsteller was in the market for a firm to handle publicity for some of his clients, and an arrangement was worked out whereby Mr. Burson took on the PR function for the agency's clients. This worked out so well that Burson-Marsteller Associates was formed in 1953 by merging Mr. Burson's operation into a firm jointly owned by Mr. Burson and the agency.

Mr. Burson said that a marked separation exists between the advertising functions of the agency and the public relations functions of BMA, but that on accounts held jointly by the PR firm and the agency, however, there is close coordination of promotional programs—a factor sold hard by the combined operation.

Burson-Marsteller's consistent growth is indicative of the increase in the business of specialized public relations referred to by Mr. Burson. One of the largest firms operating in these specialized areas, BMA serves 28 clients from offices in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Toronto.

Most of BMA's clients are publicly-owned companies manufacturing products bought by industrial users.

Overseas Expansion

Successful growth in this country and the desire to give clients support in their efforts to sell in world markets resulted in the decision of Burson-Marsteller and Marsteller, Inc. to expand overseas. It was announced this week that Marsteller International S. A. had been formed with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and that Mr. Burson would be president of Marsteller S. A. "with overall responsibilities for the company's operations in world markets."

Mr. Burson then announced the Marsteller organization had acquired a minority interest in Roles and Parker Limited, London, the United Kingdom's leading independent industrial advertising agency and had formed a joint venture enterprise known as Marsteller (Belgium) S. A. with Bodden and Dechy, a lead-

ing Belgian agency. "Public relations operations will be set up in all three countries," he said.

One of Mr. Burson's greatest skills lies probably in the field of corporate and financial PR. He is one of the few public relations men who is a member of the New York Society of Security Analysts.

Accordingly, Mr. Burson is well-qualified to discuss the nuts and bolts of the corporate image.

"Foremost tool of a successful corporate image program," Mr. Burson told E&P, "is a set of objectives — written objectives that provide guide lines for the overall program. This is easily the most crucial stage of the image-building process," he said.

"The failure of so many corporate public relations programs is that no one sat down, at the very beginning, and clearly defined the kind of picture the company wanted to paint with its program."

Second most important tool, according to Mr. Burson, is having a chief executive officer who not only believes in the image he wants his company to project, but who also personifies that image.

"I am convinced," he said, "that the president of a company can be its greatest single asset in the image-building program."

As for techniques used in image building, Mr. Burson emphasized the importance of telling a consistent story "with as few elements as you can possibly employ to get across your message."

"If you want to build your image around, say, research, hammer home research. Don't try to stretch your story to include good employee relations or sound financial management. You just can't beat using a single simple theme. Just give that single theme all the variations that your imagination can conjure," he advised.

Mr. Burson said that all too often a wide gulf has been created between advertising and public relations in a corporate structure. He told of one company in which the ad director and the PR director are both fearful of even inquiring into the activities of the other for fear of indicating encroachment on the other's operations.

"On the other hand," Mr. Burson continued, "it is encouraging to note some reversal in this kind of outdated thinking. More and more titles are those of director of public relations and advertising or vicepresident in charge of public relations and advertising. Frequently, we even run into the title, director of communications.

Mr. Burson made the point that paid advertising can have as big, if not bigger, influence on casting the corporate image than the techniques which more commonly are held to be public relations in orientation.

"My suggestion," he added, "would be for corporate public relations directors to become more cognizant of paid advertising as a force — a force, when properly put to use, can have enormous impact in establishing a company's image."

Mr. Burson believes there is "a growing sophistication" on the part of people who buy public relations and publicity services.

"The client who interviews agencies nowadays," he said, "has learned enough about our business to ask extremely intelligent questions about what he gets for his money.

"Just a few years ago, not enough people knew enough about our business to have any basis for making effective comparisons and judgments between firms competing for their accounts. Today, we're asked to show the people who will actually service the account and to detail their qualifications for the assignment.

Asked if he ever misses his early newspapering days, Mr. Burson smiled.

"I still do," he said. "I often think of those early days back in 1934 when I joined the Commercial Appeal as a \$10 per week summer copy boy, and when I covered the news at Ole Miss for the Commercial Appeal at 14 cents per column-inch."

As further evidence of his nostalgia for newspaper days, Mr. Burson introduced the latest member to join the BMA staff—Edwin T. Connell, formerly of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

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