


INSIDE TRACK

INTERVIEW HAROLD BURSON, BURSON-MARSTELLER

An old so-and-so who is definitely still in the frame

Alison Smith on how the veteran PR's global outlook has shaped the agency he helped create

 "I take this camera with me everywhere," says Harold Burson, 76-year-old founder chairman of public relations agency Burson-Marsteller, as he explains the gadget's virtues and takes pictures of the press photographer.

A long-standing interest in photography is the first reason he gives for this, but as a veteran PR he is bound to point out that the camera is made by a B-M client. When he meets someone he sends them a picture of themselves.

Mr Burson has been in PR since the 1940s when, he says, it was a matter of advising organisations how to express publicly what they had already decided to do. Now it goes well beyond that to advise on how they should behave.

"Particularly in the United States, we have moved into the phase where PR people sit on the operating committees of some big companies.

"This approach, seeing PR as a key part of the behaviour of an organisation, was articulated 75 years ago. But the pressures were

not present then to force the people who pay the bills to see it that way."

Mr Burson was originally on the other side of the notebook, as a reporter for a newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee. While expressing no regrets about leaving journalism, he carries his 1941 press card in his wallet.

Having set up his own PR agency on returning to the US after the second world war, he joined forces with advertising executive Bill Marsteller in 1953. The agency they created together was bought in 1979 by Young & Rubicam, the advertising group.

He highlights his contribution to the agency as recognising at an early stage that it had to be a global business. B-M opened its first office outside the US in 1961, choosing Geneva as the location since Switzerland's status then as a tax haven made it attractive to American companies with overseas offices.

The second international office opened in Brussels in 1965, and the agency currently operates in 35 countries. London, now the biggest office in Europe, was one

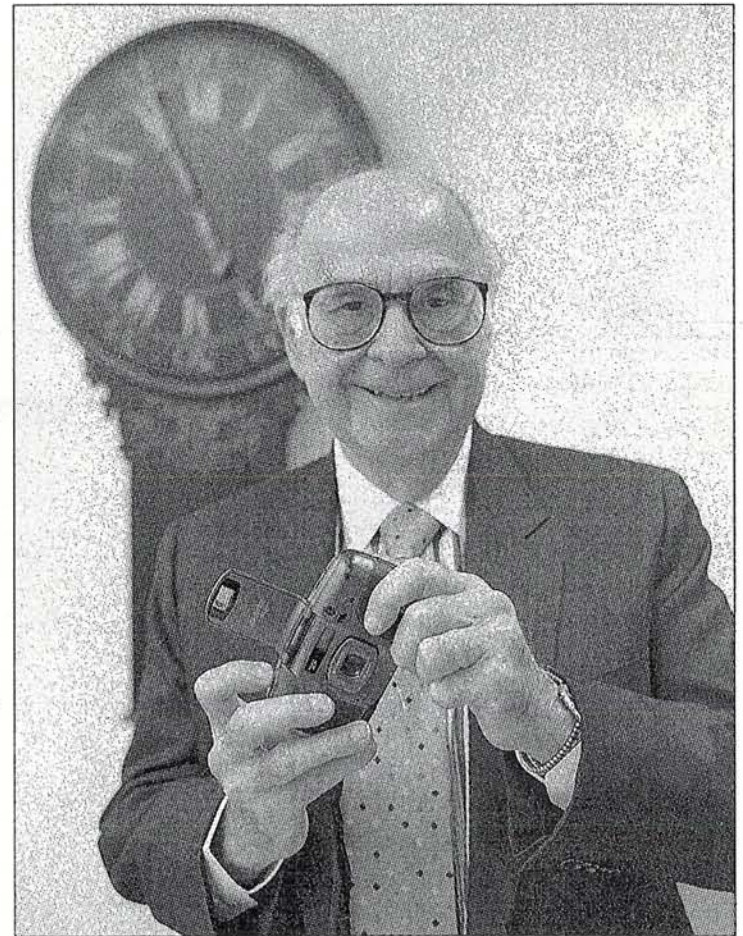
of the few to be bought (in 1974) rather than to be set up from scratch.

"We bought in London because we felt we had to go into the market with some mass," Mr Burson says. "In general, it's better to start your own, and send your own people out. Creating a common culture around the world takes a long time."

To B-M eyes, he says, it probably took the London office 15 years to be completely assimilated. "We are further along on globalisation than most of our clients. We communicate freely between offices and don't have the turf considerations that a lot of our clients do."

A recent B-M survey of business executives and others suggested that the chief executive's reputation accounted for up to 40 per cent of a company's reputation, leading the agency to argue that a company's share price can be enhanced by developing a perception of its chief executive as a star performer.

From Mr Burson's perspective, many senior executives do not appreciate how powerful they can be in shaping attitudes. Chief executives could learn from politicians in terms of setting their



In the picture: Burson knew the agency had to be a global business

own agendas for interviews. "Most chief executives going into an interview don't have an agenda - their agenda is to answer the journalists' questions. They need to be much better equipped."

What has been his agenda for this discussion? It takes a moment for Mr Burson to decide. "Well, I haven't done an interview in London for some years, so it's to show people the old so-and-so is still around, I guess."