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Mr. Bursons Wonderful Life

Harold Burson, founder of one of the world's most powerful communications agencies Burson-Marsteller, began his career as a correspondent of Nürnberg's military tribunal and ended up being a legend of PR-business.

For some of us, age is just a number. An American businessman, Harold Burson, 92, is one of them.

Burson is sitting in the lobby of Hotel Kämp, and he looks, well, quite old. However, it does not take long to notice that the guy is sharp as a razor. But sure you can expect that from a man who has established one of the largest communication agency –firms in the whole world.

Burson-Marsteller is specialized in crisis communications and reputation management, and the company has activity in 110 countries and on six different continents. It has 2500 employees. In 2011 the company was the fifth largest communications agency by revenue of 450 million dollars.

“The PR-industry has a bright future. Way too many companies have taken care of their business so poorly, that the reputation of the entire business world has gone bad. It needs a lot of help.”

Burson recalls, that the reputation is one of the most important assets a company can have. The crumbling garment factories, environmental destruction, human rights violation and management's common sense have been ran over by bonus-systems, and this has led to the fact that that in this area the companies are doing exceptionally bad. Digitalization and social media have made reputation management extremely hard, if not possible.

Burson is an active blogger and he thinks that the laws of crisis communication haven't really changed in the last 60 years he has been involved with the industry. “The rappers have a saying: ‘if

you are gonna talk-the-talk, you gotta walk-the-walk.” So basically: live like you teach. Burson’s number one rule for the companies is: Behave properly.

When following articles about Burson, the word “legend” has been used several times. *PRWeek*, the largest magazine about PR-business, named Burson newly as “the most influential PR-person of the 20th century”.

That might be true. He didn’t only create a huge worldwide communications firm, but Burson also worked as a PR-counsel for **Ronald Reagan**.

Burson has several “textbook examples” in his resume, and many of them are still been taught in business schools around the world. One of the most famous ones is the crisis with painkiller Tylenol in 1982. Eight people died in Chicago, when someone at the factory had added poisonous cyanide into the packages. With the help of Burson-Marsteller the producer **Johnson & Johnson** organized a worldwide TV-campaign that suggested people to avoid Tylenol and explained why and how the cyanide had gotten into the medicine. The CEO of Johnson & Johnson also stepped in front of the public to enlighten the people. The company pulled out over 30 million jars of Tylenol and paused producing the medicine.

This episode cost the company 200 million dollars and affected negatively Johnson & Johnson’s reputation. Still, it did not kill the brand. After six weeks, the sales of Tylenol were back to the numbers where they were before the crisis.

“If something like this would happen now, I would probably give the same advice I gave then. Step up, admit everything, take the responsibility and take care of the aftermath well.

What does it feel like creating business strategy to a company whose product has caused deaths of people? Where goes the line between PR and own ethics? Burson answers, that in this case the decisive factor was that the company hadn’t caused the damage wittingly. “Every communications agency must pick its’ clients very carefully .We don’t take customers that may cause embarrassment to other clients.

Burson's career began as a journalist. It is paradoxical that World War II appeared to be a springboard for Burson's career. Because of his background as a journalist, he was sent to Armed Forces of USA's media unit. When the military tribunal of Nürnberg started in 1945, Burson was sent there.

"It was an amazing experiment for a 24-year old man. The whole world was following my reports."

After returning to United States, Burson's mission in life began to take shape. He wanted to establish a company that is specialized with crisis communication and reputation management.

Burson-Marsteller was founded in 1953, when Burson met advertising entrepreneur **Bill Marsteller**. The two men became friends and noticed that they both needed each other's professional knowledge.

The main business idea was to offer companies "integrated marketing services" –term, that highlights the strategic importance of cooperation of sales, marketing and communications. The term didn't become official until decades later.

Burson-Marsteller was the largest communications firm for a long time. Together with Hill & Knowlton it ruled the markets all the way to the midway of the 20th century. Losing that position clearly upsets Burson.

"Advertising agencies emerged to the industry, and they take up to make aggressive acquisitions. We have always wanted to expand organically."

Burson left his position as a CEO in 1989 after leading the company for 35 years, but he still hasn't quit working. Burson still makes his daily visit to the New York headquarter. "I have slowed my pace a little. I work only eight hours per day nowadays."

Interviewing draws to an end. Burson walks towards a cab that is ready to take him to visit the ambassador of United States, Bruce Oreck. What is the accomplishment that Burson himself is the most proud of?

"I created a company that has employed thousands of people. I think that is quite good from one man."

Caption: PR is everything in life. The founder of Burson-Marsteller Harold Burson is betting that the secret of long life is that you must live like you teach. "The golden rule of business is: Do not collect enemies. I know I don't have any."