

"The clients are more interested by the outcomes of our actions"

Named by PR Week as the most influential man of the century in PR, Harold Burson, 93, has advised the greatest for more than 50 years. In 1953, he alongside Bill Marsteller, created the agency Burson-Marsteller which today has become one of the top 5 profitable PR companies in the world. Burson himself became the confidant of a number of important businessmen and statesmen.

How did the Internet change the PR industry?

Digital technology makes up a part of a continuum. It started with Gutenberg, then the telegraph was invented in 1840, the telephone 40 years later, and the cinema in the 1900s, the television in the 1920s and finally cable in the 1970s. There are a great number of tools allowing information to be diffused to the public. Digital is only the most recent to date. It has the advantage of rapidity and allows for information to reach millions of people at minimal cost. But there is a problem: there is no filter between those who deliver the message and those who receive it. Anyone can say anything without any control. Unlike with the newspaper, for example, where there are several levels of editing. And then obviously there is the problem of respect for one's private life. I think that it will take a good ten to twenty years for the Internet to become a mature means of communication. It is still a work in progress.

How does this translate in practice?

With the development of the Internet, young people read less than before. Their knowledge is more widespread but it has lost its depth. They often know that something is happening but they don't know why. The development of the Web has also led to the emergence of new players, like non-governmental organizations, which are now able to reach more people faster.

Is the process of communication speeding up?

Yes, in terms of crisis communication, for example. The media wants to know as much as they can in the first 24 hours. Now information is rarely available before 72 hours. The worst would be that they imagine that the origins of the problem are this or that. Our role is to convince them that we don't know much while we search for the real reasons.

How is your sector running today?

The public opinion of enterprises, in particular of big ones, has deteriorated. One of the reasons for this loss of confidence is that people expect the impossible from bosses: the shareholders always want more profits. If they don't respond to their demands, they are punished. The world of finance must be reeducated to remind it that economic activity goes in cycles. The public also expects more transparency than before. It is now more attentive to the respect of general interest. In this context, companies have more need to monitor their communication than in the past. The management of public relations is an activity that is on the rise globally, even in this crisis that we're in. This growth has come mainly from the rise in the demand for digital. The sector will continue to grow thanks to the Web.

Have relations with clients evolved?

There were three phases: companies and governments first worked on how to put into words the decisions they had made. From this point of view, the 1960s, in the United

States, was a very positive decade for PR activity. The second phase, the players asked themselves what message they should deliver. Finally, in the past 20 years, we have been in the third phase where what counts most for the deciders is what they must do. More and more often the head of public relations sits on the executive committee of the company. And he himself has a say in the company policies.

With the crisis, have communication budgets gone down?

The clients have cut their budgets less than they did in 2007 or 2008. But they are much more watchful over the outcomes of our actions. They spend more money on studies to check what we are doing and to measure more carefully the return on their investments.