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Lawrence G. Foster,  
Johnson & Johnson's  
former corporate  
vice president  
of public relations



Carmen Troesser/The Journal News

Harold Burson, 80, is the founder chairman of Burson-Marsteller, a public relations firm in Manhattan. In 1999 PRWeek named the Edgemont resident the most influential public relations figure in the 20th century.

## Corporate firefighter

**PR wizard Harold Burson shapes the way we talk about businesses in crisis**

Abigail Klingbeil  
The Journal News

In the corporate world, it takes only days — sometimes minutes — for things to go from dandy to disastrous. One minute things are fine, and the next, a pack of TV cameras have their spotlights trained on the CEO's door, reporters are shouting questions in the corridors, and Dan Rather is holding on line 3.

When the corporate sky is falling, for decades the man to help hold it up has been Harold Burson.

Burson is not well-known outside the industry, but he has managed some of the most notable corporate crises in recent history. His influence on the public relations industry expands beyond these individual brush fires. He has helped to shape the way in which public relations is carried out today.

Burson, 80, stepped down as the chief executive of public relations giant Burson-Marsteller in 1988, the company he co-founded in 1953. His title is now founder chairman. He goes to work every weekday

and spends much of his time visiting the company's offices worldwide. He still works for many long-term clients, including Philip Morris Companies Inc., Merrill Lynch & Co. Inc. and Coca-Cola Co., and he has no retirement plans.

"Most people regard public relations purely as communications," he said during a recent interview in his corner office at Burson-Marsteller's Park Avenue South offices in Manhattan. "I say public relations starts with behavior, trying to assess what the mood of the public is, what the tolerance of the public is and how they will respond to different patterns of behavior."

The approach has worked well for the company. It now has more than 2,000 employees and offices in 35 countries. In 1999, its fees topped \$274 million, making it the largest public relations firm in the world. Burson-Marsteller was purchased in 1979 by Young & Rubicam Inc., which, in turn, was bought by WPP Group PLC in 2000.

In 1999, PRWeek named Burson, a resident of the Edgemont section of Greenburgh, the most influential public relations person of the 20th century.

"He's been involved in a truckload of crises and his counsel has been highly valued," said Adam Leyland, editor-in-chief of PRWeek. Leyland said Burson is known for

### Harold Burson

**Title:** Founder chairman

**Age:** 80

**Personal history:** Born in Memphis, Tenn., Feb. 15, 1921.

**Education:** Graduate, University of Mississippi, 1940.

**Home:** Edgemont section of the Town of Greenburgh

**Family:** Wife, Bette, and two sons, Scott and Mark

**Professional experience:** Before formation of Burson-Marsteller in 1953, operated own public relations firm for six years. Previously (1941-43), assistant to president and public relations director, The H.K. Ferguson Company. Reporter for Memphis Commercial Appeal (1940).

**Honors:** Named most influential public relations person in the 20th Century, PRWeek, 1999; Gold Anvil Award, Public Relations Society of America, 1980; Arthur W. Page Society Hall of Fame Award, 1991; Public Relations Professional-of-the-Year, Public Relations News, 1977 and 1989.

### Best practices for corporations facing a crisis

- Do not rush to comment. Wait for the facts.
- Make full disclosure once facts are known.
- Appoint one spokesman to ensure that there are no conflicting messages from the company.

— Harold Burson

# Fighting corporate brush fires

BURSON, from 1D

his calmness under pressure and soundness of thinking.

## The Tylenol tragedy

Johnson & Johnson invited Burson to its New Brunswick, N.J., headquarters in February 1986 when the company was confronted with a second outbreak of cyanide-laced Tylenol.

In September 1982, seven people in the Chicago area were killed from capsules tainted with cyanide. Three and a half years later, the victim was Diane Elstroth, a 23-year-old Peekskill resident, who died in Yonkers after taking Tylenol.

"The major decision was to take the product off the market because we found we could no longer protect the public," said Johnson & Johnson's former corporate vice president of public relations, Lawrence G. Foster, who spoke recently from his home in Boca Grande, Fla.

Through the decision-making process, Burson acted as a sounding board, said Foster, who retired from his position at Johnson & Johnson in 1990.

"Since everyone had respect for Harold's judgment, the fact that he agreed with what we were planning to do was important," said Foster, who cited Burson's calm manner and good judgment. "He has the ability to analyze a problem in very perceptive ways and come up with solutions that are workable."

## Contingency plans

In addition to helping clients deal with crises, Burson-Marsteller helps them develop contingency plans for potential crises.

One crisis Burson failed to foresee was New Coke. Burson was involved in the introduction of the soft drink in the spring of 1985.

"That's one of the most tense situations I ever have been in," Burson said. The new soft drink formula was met with immediate protests.

"I didn't have the intuition to realize how great a proprietary interest the public felt they had in the product," Burson said. "I wasn't sufficiently perceptive. I was misled by the research as were the other people."

The company consulted with Union Carbide after a poison gas disaster at the company's Bhopal, India, plant in 1984 killed an estimated 3,800 people.

Some detractors criticize the company's willingness to take on challenges like the tragedy at



Burson-Marsteller

Seated, from left, Bill Marsteller and Harold Burson, founders of public relations giant Burson-Marsteller, in a 1976 photo.

Bhopal, but Burson defends his company's record.

"We have sometimes been criticized for, say, working for the Bhopal Union Carbide situation over in India. I have no qualms whatsoever in having worked on that, trying to help Union Carbide work themselves out of that situation. I think Union Carbide worked in a very ethical way," Burson said. "I think these companies are entitled to representation. I think it's part of their first amendment rights."

Burson said his company has turned down work from companies he felt were not prepared to be forthright.

## Ethics come first

Burson is oft-cited for his ethical standards.

"He's not only done wonderful things for the public relations industry in this country, but all around the world," said Jack W. Felton, president and CEO of The Institute for Public Relations, a professional development organization.

"He's been very much an advocate for telling the truth in a field where there are some who don't believe in telling the truth as strongly as he does," Felton said.

In the industry, he is also known for developing the first global public relations company and for leading the industry in integrated services, by offering clients both public relations and advertising services. Burson-Marsteller's other co-founder, the now deceased Bill Marsteller, had owned a Chicago-based advertising firm.

Burson is admired for the strength of his company's employee training programs and for creating a culture that has nourished thousands of careers and helped start legions of other public relations companies.

"He's had an influence in every area of PR I can think of," Leyland said.

## A different world

Burson said during the length of his career he has seen public relations change from meaning, "How do you say it?" to "What do you say?" and now, "What do you do?"

"We have been very central to the strategy of a number of organizations," Burson said.

"(Harold Burson's) one of the real pathfinders in the public relations field," said Michael McDermott, who teaches graduate and undergraduate public relations classes at Iona College in New Rochelle, and worked in corporate public relations for nearly 30 years.

"He has been an integral part of shaping the public relations profession since the end of World War II."

Burson said the social revolution of the 1960s heightened companies' concern about public opinion, thus increasing the role public relations plays in business. "I think it has made businesses much more transparent," Burson said.

"I think it has brought greater responsibility to business. They know they've got to live up to the expectations of the public, otherwise they're not going to survive."