

STILL A PLAYER

Image maker from Humes set game rules for industry

By Jill Johnson Piper
Staff Reporter

As Humes High School graduates go, Harold Burson isn't as well known as, say, Elvis Presley. But while Elvis was shaping the music of the 1950s, Burson was defining a young American industry called public relations, in which he is still very much a player.

Burson is the chairman of Burson-Marsteller, the largest international public relations agency in the world, with more than 40 offices worldwide, 2,000 employees, and close to 1,000 clients.

This spring, Burson will deliver the commencement address at his alma mater, the University of Mississippi. While he has been showered with accolades — he received the Horatio Alger Award in 1986 and an honorary degree from Boston University last year — he is no stranger to hard times.

Burson was born in South Memphis. His parents were English immigrants, and his father bought a hardware store. During the Depression, the family moved to Chelsea and Breedlove. Burson worked as a copy boy while attending Humes High School.

The company he started after World War II did an estimated volume of \$158 million last year. Will success spoil Harold Burson?

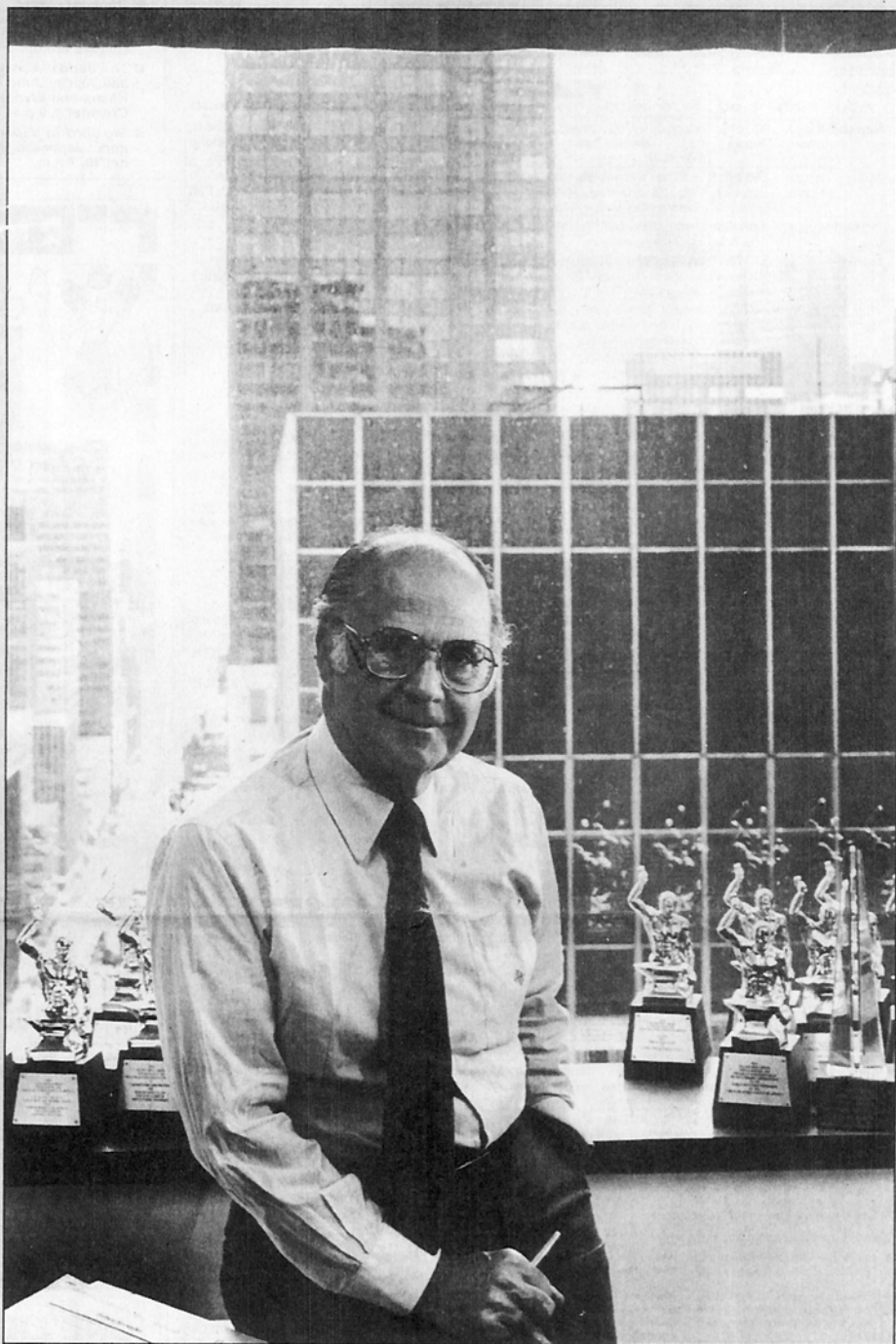
"Winston Churchill once said of Clement Attlee, 'He's a very modest man. Of course he's got a lot to be modest about.' I suppose that applies to me," Burson joked in a telephone interview.

Burson, 67, rivals Malcolm Forbes for sexagenarian energy. But unlike Forbes, Burson doesn't go in for self-promotion, just hard work. He leaves his Scarsdale home at 6:30 every morning so he can be at the Manhattan offices of Burson-Marsteller by 7:15.

When seven cyanide deaths were linked to Tylenol in 1982, it was Burson who helped Johnson & Johnson regain the public's confidence. When outrage over the new Coca-Cola boiled over, management took the heat with Burson's guidance.

When the Olympic Organizing Committee wanted to convince the world that Seoul, Korea, was a safe place to have the summer games, they put Burson on the job. His strategy for Seoul was to keep the games separate from the country's politics.

"The challenge there was to convince the world that the Olympics would go forward, even though there was political unrest in Korea. When you see pictures of student demonstrations every night on TV, it's not easy. We divorced the Olympics from the



Harold Burson, chairman of Burson-Marsteller, the largest international public relations agency in the world, graduated from Humes High School. The agency has more than 40 offices, 2,000 employees, and nearly 1,000 clients.

politics. Our strong feeling was that even though the students were protesting the government, the country was unified in wanting the games to go on successfully."

Seoul exemplified Burson's public relations philosophy, that establishing a favorable identity for a client requires strategy and execution of equal strength. The strategic phase involves mental roadwork: getting to know the

company, and anticipating roadblocks. The components of the execution phase may be publicity, investor relations, lobbying, even corporate counseling, all of which go into creating a favorable public persona.

"Then you want that company's name to mean something, whether it's buy their products or go to work for them or invest in its stock. What you've got to communicate are

actions that make people think well of what a company does," Burson said.

Burson's handling of the Tylenol case has become a standard in public relations textbooks under "crisis communications." Burson said the credit for making the best of a bad situation belongs to Jim Burke, the chairman of Johnson &

Burson

Johnson, who ordered a \$150 million product recall.

"He had the resolve and the judgment and a very strong sense of what is right and what is wrong. Basically I served to help him think through problems and reinforce his own instincts. These incidents, when they get that large, spawn a lot of copycat activity. He did not want any of the copycat activity to spill over onto his product," Burson said.

In the months following the tragedy, Burson-Marsteller's research team was polling consumers every day. "The vast majority of the people believed that Tylenol was a safe product. It was evident from the beginning that the tampering was not done while the product was still under the control of the manufacturer. It was done after it was on

the shelf and that's a big difference and people recognized it. We communicated that very strongly. A lot of people said they wanted to wait and see that Johnson & Johnson said it was absolutely safe," Burson said.

For the Philip Morris tobacco company, Burson's strategy is to meet the anti-smoking debate head on. It goes something like this, he said: "You as an individual have a choice. You can use their product or you can elect not to use their product . . . and they will defend your right to have a choice."

Burson learned the ropes of the public relations game while working as a correspondent for The Commercial Appeal. In 1940, Burson was sent to cover the construction of the Wolf Creek Ordnance Plant, an armament factory in Milan, Tenn. When the story attracted national attention, the owner of the company building the plant, H. K. Ferguson, asked Burson to be-

come his press officer.

"I had always wanted to go to New York, and I had dreamed of the day when somebody was going to rescue me. I was making \$25 a week as a reporter. Mr. Ferguson doubled my salary and gave me access to a car."

When he returned from Europe after two years in the Army, his job was waiting for him. But in Burson's absence, his mentor, Ferguson, had died. "It seemed to me it wouldn't be the same. I asked them if I went into business myself in New York would they become my first client, and very graciously they did in August 1946."

He linked up with the late Bill Marsteller in 1953, and together they acquired an impressive list of clients, among them Rockwell, Merrill Lynch, DuPont and Westinghouse.

Burson is married to the former Bette Ann Foster of Manhattan. They were wed in 1947 and have two sons. They live in the

same house they've owned in Scarsdale for 34 years with a 12-year-old West Highland white terrier who "really kind of dominates me," Burson said.

Besides the Boston University degree, his most gratifying moment was an opportunity to introduce President Reagan at a dinner last year. "For a country boy like me to sit next to the President is an awe-inspiring experience. I just never did feel I would be up in front of an audience of 340 people saying, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States of America.'"