

Burson — the American image-maker

Founding chairman of PR firm Burson Marsteller stands out as a friend to US presidents and an adviser to top CEOs

THINK IBM and Lou Gerstner comes to mind. Sun Microsystems and Scott McNealy, the "Javaman". Intel and Andy Grove. General Electric and Jack Welch. A few years ago, you could not say Chrysler without thinking of Lee Iacocca.

Except perhaps for Mr Iacocca, who did a series of television commercials for Chrysler during its bailout years, these CEOs rarely appear in paid advertisements on behalf of their companies. Yet, in the public mind, their images stick inseparably with the companies they run.

Enter, Mr Harold Burson. For nearly half a century, the founding chairman of public relations firm Burson Marsteller has been helping to construct images for companies and the people who run them.

"Burson Marsteller did a

study last year to find out how much of a corporation's reputation is dependent on CEOs' reputations and the number we came up with was almost 40 per cent. That's how important image is!" says Mr Burson.

Where ad agencies use

IN GOOD COMPANY

By RAVIVELLOOR

pretty models, catchy copy and prime space to "sell" their clients, Mr Burson enters through another door and one with far greater credibility — the news pages of magazines and newspapers and the "non-commercial" time on television.

Against the aggressive directness of the ad world, his hooks, lines and sinkers have been the deft suggestion, the artfully written corporate profile with a hint of an appropriate angle for a newsman to follow, and that blandishment to which the average journalist is lured so easily: high-level access and the promise of an "exclusive".

"The big problem with CEOs is that when it comes to media, they want to be risk-free and that you can never be," says Mr Burson, who turns 78 this month.

He cites a client who once won an appreciative front-page story in the Wall Street Journal, yet appeared upset by the piece. "I read it line by line and it looked fine. So, I asked him why he was upset and he pointed to a line that described him as portly! I asked him, 'would you prefer to be called fat?'"

Mr Burson's favourite client is the late Roberto Goizueta who powered Coke to its heights. And he counts the launch of New Coke and the subsequent pullback to Coke



JEROME SING

Life is like a spinning top and Mr Burson, who turns 78 this month, will try to keep spinning as long as he can.

Classic as the most challenging PR assignment he has handled.

"Our strategy was humility: be humble. Apologise to the American public for taking Coca-Cola away from them — the one they preferred. Apologise for presuming we knew better than they

which was a better-tasting product," he says, insisting that all the noise about New Coke was not itself a clever marketing ploy, as some thought at the time.

"A book recently said I questioned the research on New Coke. I had not. I was afraid we didn't have good re-

search but I did not know why."

The big change that has come about in the business he has known for over five decades is the appreciation for the PR professional. Public relations has become more strategic and its people given increasing importance in cor-

porations. They started out as managers, then directors, and vice-presidents. Today, most Fortune 500 companies have a senior vice-president in charge of PR and, more important, he is a member of the management committee.

His oft-repeated advice to CEOs is to cultivate a clutch of journalists who really matter to the industry, invite them over for coffee for no-agenda chats.

That way, you tend to get fair treatment if the story could be embarrassing or cause discomfort. Mr Burson says he knows top managers who say they have learnt a lot from journalists because the reporters also get to talk to their competitors.

Mr Burson started out as a copyboy and put himself through college contributing to his hometown newspaper in Memphis. He says the big change in his lifetime is the tendency for American journalists to go for the lowest common denominator to get ahead on ratings.

One example: "I read recently that when Walter Cronkite was anchor for CBS between 1964-81, he used a vocabulary of 10,000

words. Dan Rather, who succeeded him, uses 5,000 words. That shows how they have tried to expand the audiences. Rather is probably the better reporter but the TV stations have got to make it simple."

Friend of US presidents, counsellor to the top CEOs of America, Mr Burson describes life as like a spinning top, the reason, he says, he insists on doing a full day's work even today.

"You know what happens when a top stops spinning. So I try to keep spinning as long as I can. And have you seen old 78 rpm phonograph records? When it comes to the end, it goes whoosh...that's how it is."

A life spent spinning and yet it rankles when anyone suggests he is a spinmeister.

"The real spinners are the newspaper people. Look at the Washington correspondents: on every issue they put their spin on it."

"I am just giving you the story from the point of view of my client. I don't want you to carry my water. All I want of you is to be fair. I think the greatest compliment I could give you — if you were working on a controversial issue — is 'he wrote a balanced story'."