

## **OPENING DOORS:**

### **Reginald Watts talks to Harold Burson in his 90th year on future directions for the PR profession**

Harold Burson started our discussion by saying he considered “the public relations business could be set for the most important period of expansion in our history”. A statement that set the tone for my conversation in the New York Park Avenue headquarters of Burson Marsteller. It was early morning after 400 people the night before had congregated from round the world to celebrate his 90th birthday. It was a significant opening comment from the man, who in 1953 with Bill Marsteller founded what is now one of the largest PR operations in the world. Unlike many elder statesmen of the industry who reminisce unstoppably about their past Harold talks always about the future. He still comes into his office each morning like any member of staff.

He believes the profession can no longer remain in a garden of remembrance as if time has stood still. Opportunities will need to be taken if we are to broaden our working constituency and resist at the gate disciplines and professions like the law, diplomacy and management consultancy who take advantage of the straightjackets we have placed upon ourselves by defining what is and what is not public relations.

The future is about broadening the range of disciplines that inform our decision making. To do this we have to widen the profession’s constituency and realise the application and development of social media is not enough in itself to keep ahead of competitors striking at the gate. Exploiting the online media may well sharpen our external profile as a profession but we need to open new doors ourselves and gain entry to disciplines frequently unexplored by practitioners.

This means generating a better understanding of the whys and wherefores of public policy decisions, appreciating more clearly the reasons for financial legislation aimed at protecting investors and above all, we must track closely new research as it appears in social sciences, genetics, robotics and even nanotechnology all of which will in the next few years change society beyond current recognition.

It is the role of the modern PR practitioner to separate social change from current fads and serve as the corporate monitor who checks on public policies and the dangerous pressures that arise as they are shaped by the media, by government and sometimes changing demographics. It is our role to understand how changes take place and whether they meet public expectations. For example, it is Harold Burson’s belief there is no defined relationship as many practitioners believe, between public relations and corporate social responsibility. They are not cousins or even siblings. They are closer than identical twins. They are one and the same thing.

These comments were no more than a background to understanding the strands that will underpin future expansion. To understand this thread he turned to the past arguing that PR was probably the oldest profession in the world, cueing Stanley Baldwin’s comment about power without responsibility exercised by the other claimant, he said public relations has always directed its gaze towards ultimate goals and in doing so strengthened its power to offer advice which carried considerable

responsibility. Public relations as a discipline, he considers, is nothing new. What else were the hundreds of scribes in ancient Egypt doing but establishing better understanding of government decisions on the one hand and explaining to their leaders how to smooth their passage into the next world? Even earlier than that cave drawings dated 30,000 years before may well have been prepared by shamans who communicated through marks of coded information to their Palaeolithic publics.

He reminded me as I sat in his New York office how the campaign run by Samuel Adams from 1764 onwards implemented one of the most successful PR campaigns in history. He set out to ferment the American settlers through op-ed pieces in the media, speeches, leaflets and public meetings to fight for independence from the English throne. Even the Boston Tea Party in 1773 was a brilliant piece of persuasive event organisation.

I reminded him of his English heritage, he was born in Yorkshire, leading to the next stage of his argument. Commenting on his own background and how his father was a great reader always interested in world affairs saying to him “you have got to be in the know and should have knowledge of what is going on in the world. Read widely”. This meant reading in depth. Harold warned that Blackberry and computer sourced information with its shortening of news items was not the same thing. It ignored real analysis and the deeper considerations that drove most government and corporate policy.

The purpose of his comments on PR history and the need for wide reading and wide interests led into what he believes PR is about and where managers should direct their thinking. His belief is that communication programmes should not start from the point of “what can PR do to help”, which immediately restricts the methodology, but rather turn problems on their head: “What do you want to achieve?” Once you start from that premise a new constituency opens up. Light is shed on his belief that the future is one of opportunity only if the profession is willing to accept the challenge.

His belief that the profession should start its thinking from “what is the problem and how can we solve it” reminded me of how intrigued I was when working for BM that the New York office had a sizable advertising department. Nothing to do with the owners of the company Y & R, but because ‘bought space’ was frequently an adjunct to the total PR programme, as could be direct marketing, market research or whatever other discipline could help refine a solution to a problem. Understanding the totality not only led to understanding client’s problem in the first place but drove thinking through to valid advice, the development of effective messages delivered clearly to defined audiences.

I remember hearing Maurice Saatchi say that when he had review sessions with clients he seldom talked about advertising. The discussion revolved around the client’s problems, needs and solutions. Advertising was simply one part of the solution.

At another level he does not detach product from company PR. He dislikes the idea of separating product public relations from corporate communications as if each was highly specialised and almost a different discipline. Product support along with

market research relate back to company reputation even when that reputation has to be filtered through intermediate stages at subsidiary and SBU level.

He goes further saying product communications may in the long run be part of corporate reputation but even at that level corporate communications derives from company's business needs and strategy. Both are intertwined and the future for our industry is to ensure practitioners at every level are trained to advise on core business strategies. Hence Harold's comment that corporate social responsibility was integral to its public relations which in itself was part of reputation management. All else is implementation.

Harold was delighted when I said we had created a Research & Development Unit within the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations. He agrees research was not just the monitoring of effectiveness or even the checking of audience attitudes. It had to become an ongoing ingredient for practitioner's thought processes.

All the advice we give whether we are in-house or to clients, must be supported by researched analysis that utilises high quality sourcing. The days when senior practitioners could fall back on an opinion or rely on who they knew are long past. Depth of reading is about more than books on markets or management techniques. The practitioner of the future will be a lifelong student. Public relations leaders to-day have an urgent responsibility to strengthen and constantly up-date their courses, integrating them closely with University syllabuses that should increasingly include high quality business training where possible, even integrated into MBA courses. Widening the subject ranges will mean lengthening courses. A difficult area in the current climate of high fee increases, but the legal and accountancy professions have done it and salaries and fees improved accordingly.

In the future we must be prepared to draw in people with wider backgrounds and qualifications. I questioned him about his own breadth of interests where his CV includes an incredible range of themes and subjects which must have been well outside the normal requirements of his business and client interests. For example I saw that he was a Presidential appointee to the US Fine Arts Commission, he was Chair of the American National Council on Economic Education, a Board Member of the World Wildlife Fund in Geneva, a founder of the Kennedy Centre Corporate Fund, a founder of the Fortas Chamber Music Fund, a member of the Presidents Advisory Board of the New York Academy of Sciences and many others. When this range of interests are combined with receiving many honours and awards from organisations outside the profession it becomes obvious that his belief that wide reading and wide interests combine to generate what he calls "the essential armaments for the senior business adviser". His reply to my comment about his involvement in the arts was that he considered the arts in every form were important in terms of what they said and how they identified social change pointing the finger at issues which deserved attention.

I asked for advice to new graduates joining our industry. He repeated, read widely not just trade and marketing journals but on politics and global issues, take responsibilities as board members on Trusts and pro bono activity. This is where to widen perceptions and learn to apply in practical terms research data and use it as tools of our trade. Above all constantly expand skills through academic qualifications

even if they put pressure on spare time. “We are lucky” he said “to be working in one of the most exciting and important fields of work available. More importantly the more experience we gain the more accurate will be our advice to clients and corporations alike”.

“The public relations executive” he says “must become the sensor of social trends; help formulate policies that will enable corporations to adapt to new trends, communicating internally and externally to explain reasons for policy. Changes will occur faster than ever before so the practitioner will be involved in all the steps from analysis through to action, communication and advising on the need to meet public obligations which are numerous and constantly changing.”

At his 90th party the night before he commented “I always learn so much from my clients”. I thought that was a typical modest and valuable piece of advice for practitioners joining our business.

*AUTHOR: Reginald Watts joined Burson Marsteller when it opened in London in the late sixties becoming CEO, and later CEO and Chairman, joining the International Board in New York. He considers his 18 years with the company to be career-shaping and felt lucky to be included in their annual global senior manager training programmes. He says, "the company was a good example of how the Founders can shape the total culture of a company". Reginald has a PhD in the application of visual semiotics to corporate communications, has written four books and is currently Chair of the CIPR's Board of Examiners, recently helping launch the CIPR Research & Development Unit.*

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