

## **Bob Leaf**

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**Welcome again to Media Masters, a series of extended one-to-one interviews with people at the very top of their game. Today we have a real treat in store for you – I'm joined by Robert Leaf. Robert is a genuine industry legend; 82 years old, he has quite rightly been called 'the father of PR'.**

**As international chairman, he grew Burson-Marsteller to become the largest PR agency in the world, and his trophy cabinet has collapsed under the weight of all his awards and accolades. Just a few: in 2000, CIPR gave him the first ever Alan Campbell award for outstanding contributions to public relations; in 2011 he received US journalism's highest award – the Missouri Honour Medal for distinguished service to journalism – previous recipients include Winston Churchill, no less; in 2013, the American biographical Institute named him 'one of the greatest minds of the 21st century', and here in the UK, Debrett's have recognised him as one of the most influential people in the country.**

I'd turn up to listen to that guy!

**Well, I think we should start at the beginning! How on earth did you get into the PR business?**

Well, I got into the PR business because I had a degree in journalism and I was in the army, they made a lecturer. After that I went to work for a small publicity outfit, and then I went to be at Burson-Marsteller as the first trainee they ever had.

**How did you get that job, then?**

What happened was I went to a book of PR firms, and I wrote to a pile of them, and a pile of companies like IBM and so on, and they answered, and they wanted someone there, but they didn't want to hire me because they thought that I had too much experience, and they wanted somebody to open the president's mail, Harold Burson's mail, they wanted a trainee. So the interview was along the line of, "You're much too good." "No, I'm not." "Yes, you're very, very good." "No, I'm not really that good." And then went on and on, and so I finally convinced him I wasn't that good, and Harold Burson wasn't there, he met me the next day, I met with him and we

spent a half hour and he said, “Bob, you want to go in PR, you can start on Monday,” and that was it. And that was 55 years ago.

**Why did you choose PR? I imagine as a young man you could have chosen any industry.**

The funny thing is, when I went to journalism school I wanted to be a sports writer, then I wanted to be in advertising, but when I saw the lectures on PR and what it was doing, I thought this was something new that had a great future, so I switched my degree to public relations.

**How long were you at Burson-Marsteller for?**

Oh, well I’m still in their offices now! I still advise them, so it’s 55 years I have been involved with them, 40 years I was physically... you know, I was the international chairman. In the last 15 I am in their offices and I act as an advisor, among doing other work.

**Wow. I mean, 40 years – that must be an incredible journey.**

It was! What was so great about it was because we started as a very tiny company, and I got a break that no-one else will have because nowadays, every big PR firm, whether you’re Edelman or Hill+Knowlton or anybody else, there’s a head of Europe, there’s a head of Asia, there’s a head of South America, because it was just starting. I was head of all of them – and that will never happen again. So I could open in Europe, I could open in Australia, I could open in South America, and nobody will have that job ever again.

**Was that quite a cultural challenge? I imagine if, like you’ve just said, if you expand a PR agency internationally now, the chances are you’re going to buy something that exists there already, and they already know the culture, and so on. You were going to far flung corners of the world and you had the cultural issues.**

I had one break, because I had a master’s degree in history, where I had studied the history of nearly all these countries that I had gone to, and in some places I knew, like in France, in France, the French never liked the British and didn’t like the Americans at all because English had taken over the language from French and they resented it.

**They still do now.**

But I knew more about their history than they did, like it was, “Oh yes, they fired 2,608 bullets in there,” or something, and because they felt I knew their history, I had

no problems in France. It was the only office we ever had that I never had an English or American man in.

**What prompted you to get into this role and expanding internationally? Did you kind of fall into it as the company expanded, or is it something you deliberately set out to do?**

Well, Harold Burson said we should go overseas, and in fact I was made international vice president before we had an international! Because companies were really all interested in that. And then we started overseas, and we were mainly in Europe, but we felt the clients... you see, when we had client business, and the clients were going more and more overseas in those days, some we followed them, some we led them, and then I set up offices all over the world and so that was some of the most exciting things that ever happened to me.

**In terms of the mechanics of PR back then, what was it actually like? Because nowadays you just email journalists and buy media discs and spam them! To state the obvious, it's a completely different animal.**

Well, in those days, surprisingly enough it was primary publicity. I mean, it's much more sophisticated now, you didn't have social networking or anything like that, it was basically writing articles, and the people going into it were journalists – but that has changed. But each of the countries, it was very different. You have to understand, I think one of the reasons we were successful is we never said, "We are an American company in Hong Kong." We were a Hong Kong company that happens to be owned by Americans. Like I'd say probably the most exciting things from me in Russia, in Moscow, during the Cold War I gave a speech there and then they hired us, and opened the first PR firm in Russia. I signed in the Great Hall of the People in China and put the Chinese into public relations in government for the first time. I opened the first big PR company in the Middle East. So each of these places were different. They were very different, and you had to learn that they were different, and that's why it was so much fun – I really, really enjoyed everything I was doing.

**What was your primary motivation then, in expanding internationally?**

Those marketplaces needed it! The difference was, they didn't have it.

**So you were plugging a gap.**

What happened was, there were small firms, but as I said, like in Russia, public relations didn't exist. And in the Middle East there was not, as it is known today. So we were bringing something that was new, that we felt had great growth potential – that was the main reason. And every area we went in to, we grew at that time,

because we were the starters. Now, there are PR firms that are bigger than Burson today, but in those days we were becoming quite dominant internationally.

**What was your lifestyle? Were you always travelling, always on planes, or did you tend to be based in London? How did it work?**

Well, I first was based in Brussels, then I moved to London, which I really enjoyed, on a two-year assignment.

**It's been a long two years!**

Don't trust American companies! Yes, it's been the longest two years. And I was mainly travelling, but I had a very good deal – I could take my wife with me anywhere I went, and they allowed it. Today, believe it or not, it's taxable if you bring your wife and it's not for a business meeting, if you just want her to go somewhere you want to show her. So she travelled all over the world with me, which was a great benefit, because she absolutely adored it.

**What was the favourite area of the world that you expanded to? Clearly there's so many to choose from.**

I'll tell you... there was no favourite, because it's according to when you were there. I mean, you can go to a place, even in tourism, and if the weather is lousy, you have a terrible time. You come back six months later and it's beautiful, you have a great time. I liked nearly every place – different kinds of excitement. The Middle East was very, very different, and we worked for the number two man in the country whose father was the head of Saudi Arabia. Working on the King Faisal Foundation, talking about charities in the Middle East, was different from the other clients. So we had a varied... what the client was, what their needs were, and I found all of it exciting. I lived in Hong Kong for a couple of years, which was very exciting. And the funny thing is, Hong Kong... they had this funny thing, feng shui – which means 'the wind' – and where you put your office has to be by a window that has the best wind coming in. So even though I was the most senior man, had a bigger office, the man in charge of profits had an office where the wind was coming, and when we opened it, we had to have a pig outside the door that everyone had to have a piece of that pig, everyone in that company, so we would be successful.

**A pig?**

A pig, yes.

**Like, a dead...?**

It was dead, yes – we didn't eat live pigs! And for example, one of my greatest accomplishments happened to be in Malaysia – I drove an evil spirit out of the ladies' room! The others were not allowing their daughters to come to work because there was an evil spirit, so I spoke to a religious man, who chanted and it was gone. We became the biggest PR firm in Malaysia, and that spirit hasn't been back in 50 years! So that was one of my exciting jobs.

**How do you expand a PR firm internationally? Is it a bit like McDonald's, where you take a toolkit of methodologies, you have a way of doing things and you localise it, or did you have to start from scratch in every territory?**

No – it's different. You have different needs in different places. It depends on what is needed within that marketplace. Now, they might have needed more in South America when we started there than they needed in Australia, so it's what is necessary. What are people looking for? What are the companies really wanting the PR firm to provide? And it's changed dramatically now. Clients are much more difficult today than they ever were – they are much tougher. They will pay better, bigger budgets, but very demanding. They want to see results, and they've got to prove it – and as I said, the social networking, you'd better have somebody who really understands digital when you make a pitch or a new PR firm – but it's changed dramatically. And as I said – and my memoirs have just published [\*The Art of Perception\*](#) – public relations today is really managing perceptions, and that is the key to the whole future. And it's not only for PR people – you can be a doctor. In fact, there's been studies, like in my book I mention that doctors are considered to be incredibly bad at dealing with their patients. And they once did a study where doctors taped oncologists speaking to their own patients, about 90 of them, and these were all dying patients, and afterwards, the doctor said 70% would have been better off never having spoken to their doctor.

**So they went to the doctor and they were spoken to so poorly that it actually...?**

Yes. Overall, they would have been better off not speaking to them. And that's doctors saying that, not PR people. So it's really how you deal. And perceptually, you can change... like perceptions. There's four kinds of perceptions. One, it doesn't exist, like you open a new restaurant in an area that's never had one. It doesn't exist. Or, there's a perception and it's positive, but you want to make it more positive, like when the churches are collecting money for certain charities. Or it's negative, and you've got to try and change it to a certain degree. Or it's so negative, like Israel and the Middle East with the Arabs, it can't change completely, you try and modify it. But it can change. I'll give you one story... you can change perception with one sentence. When I gave a speech in Moscow, I had to talk to Lithuania, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and this was during the cold war, and Russia, about advertising and PR. The Russians had an encyclopaedia along the lines of

'advertising is something the west uses to get people to buy things they don't need' and so on. So I gave this speech, and at the end I said I'd answer questions. And one professor said, "Mr Leaf – how do you justify social good of advertising?"

### **That's quite a convincing accent actually!**

And I said, "Egypt was before Saddam, the Egyptians weren't – or the Russians. So I said, "You want to sell harvesters to the Egyptians. The Americans want to sell harvesters. Now, if the Americans sell, and the money goes to capitalists, they use it to take their girlfriends out around the world, they buy second homes for themselves. If you do it, you build roads, you build hospitals and you give it to the poor." And he said, "Mr Leaf, I can accept that in the Russian state advertising agency Rossiya Segodnya hired us based on the answer to one question, changing your whole perception." And that's why, when I talk about perceptions, and that's why I like to remain in the universities, is that it is perception today that counts.

### **But we were talking off-air before the podcast started going about the Catholic church, for example, and how the change of pope has completely revolutionised how it's viewed.**

Oh – that's a perfect example. Because the Catholic church... when we had clients in the early days, I would say to the client, "Argue with the government, but don't argue with the church in Ireland. Argue with the government, and that's it." Later, every Catholic mother wanted four children – one to be a priest, one to be a doctor, and two to have four kids a piece so she'd have enough grandchildren – but all of a sudden, with the problems with the pederasts, but not only that, the article about nuns and the way the nuns had... it got so bad, that last year they had to go to Africa to get priests for Ireland. And so the whole perception, all because of the present pope, has changed dramatically, both in Ireland and in Boston, which they had a lot of problems with pederasts, and they had become anti-Catholic... this pope has changed the concepts so that, for the first time, in Ireland, people have been turning to the church, and people who weren't even Catholic are joining. And that's what the perception of one man has done to change the whole feeling about Catholicism around the world.

### **So it's almost the chicken and the egg. Is it that he is who he is, and that's changing perception, or did he set out to do it? Do you think people just looked at the previous pope, Pope Benedict, and just thought, "We don't like this guy for whatever reason," and it just kind of... it's the fruits of the poisonous tree, as it were?**

It is... it is 'you are what you are', and his thinking, and the things that he wants to do are what the Catholics feel they really need. It's not as much a dislike of the last one, as this man is changing, and the politicians... I mean, it's amazing. Obama ran the

first time, 2010. He gets all the young vote. So what does he do? He only spends it on Medicare, doesn't talk a word about jobs, and if you're 21 and out of work, you don't care about Medicare. 2012, the Republicans took over Congress. He didn't understand the perception of the own people that had elected him. He and all the politicians can and will a lot of times says things that alienate his own people! Sentences that, if he had thought more what the perception of the answer would be.

**Do you think he's doing it deliberately?**

No, no. Never, no.

**You don't think he's trying to distance himself from the party?**

No, not at all. Not at all. You don't say a thing that's going to alienate that you don't want to alienate. If you want to alienate, then you're saying it *to* alienate. But you say a thing and you find out, "Boy, I didn't expect that the people would be so upset about that." And Miliband's found the same problem.

**How can it be the people that are supposedly at the top of their game, you know, Barack Obama, David Cameron – how can they be making these kind of schoolboy PR/communications errors?**

No, at the top of their game, I'm not saying they didn't do good, Cameron has done some excellent things in order to set his popularity, I think, growing a little... it's just they don't think about perception, and that's what I'm saying. That's what my book is about and my lectures are about, is because it's what is going to be the perception of what you say, what you do, and the same with marriages – the perception of how your wife is going to react to something, so you know her well enough to know that there's certain things you won't say. How you raise your children depends on your perception of what they're like, what you want them to be like, how you think they are going to become the way you want them to be like.

**So do you think society has become much more PR focused?**

Oh, yes. There's no question it is, as far as PR is concerned. PR is growing. Journalism, unfortunately, is having major problems. The newspapers are cutting back...

**There's no money in it.**

There's no money in it – but that's helping the PR business because, for example, if I... years ago, if I wanted to go to the Telegraph and I said, "I've got a great story – I know this guy Paul, who's the worst guy in the world, and I'll tell you all about him," They would say, "We will have our research assistant look up Paul, and we'll call

you.” Now, because there is no research assistant, they say, “Paul’s that bad? Come on in and tell us about him.” So the ability to place stories, and the need... but surprisingly enough, the writing... a lot of the writing is much weaker. It used to be all journalists, and nowadays... a lot of editors show me releases they receive – you wouldn’t believe. Spelling is wrong, the leads not at the front, it’s on the 11<sup>th</sup> paragraph, so it can vary dramatically.

**Is that because... I know a lot of people in PR who are ex-journalists, but there’s a lot of people now that go straight into PR, that have never dealt with any kind of media.**

Exactly – so they haven’t done much writing. And they are very good with it, because I look, health care is growing, one of the fastest parts of public relations is health care. So you’re getting people who might have looked into medicine as a career that have gone into it, and it’s growing very fast.

**Do you think PR is doing so incredibly well because journalism isn’t?**

No – I think it’s doing well because it’s needed more. It’s growing a little, as a said, because maybe the decline of journalism. I lecture at the university and I was stunned to find out how many of the students majoring in PR had switched from majoring in journalism, because they don’t think the future there is anything like it is in PR. But as I say, with the future, you’ve got to be much more careful. Like when you’re pitching for business, like you’re pitching health care, they have like... Ed Burson, the chairman, came out with a thing based on evidence-based PR. And you go, and maybe you talk to 30 doctors before you even go to see the potential client, and then you come in and you say, “Look , the reason that they’re not buying your drug is the competition is this, and we think you can do this, and this is the evidence that we’re going,” and the client buys it and they’ll pay. But at the end of six months to a year, you’d better have done what you have promised with your evidence-based PR. So the clients are much, much tougher. They are much more sophisticated – and a lot of it is because of social media and things like that.

**Do you think there is an obsession these days with metrics? In the old days, you were never obsessed with how many thousands of Twitter followers you could get, and readership, and punch, and all this kind of thing. I wonder whether that slightly detracts. I would rather have 10 Twitter followers that are the right type of people.**

That’s not it, no. It’s not metrics and volume. What you just said is the exact truth of the business. You go to a client and say, “Look, I got you 20 articles in the newspaper, and one of them says you are the worst firm that ever lived!” I don’t think he’s going to increase your budget. So the difference is, what was on Facebook? Why was it good? Even one article. What has it accomplished according to what you

see as your needs? And that is the key – knowing what you need. And also, having a great idea of the perceptions of the people you are trying to reach. What are their perceptions? Maybe they really like to use certain ones of them, you don't have to spend as much time. Other potential customers might not like you as much. One of the biggest changes, believe it or not, is your own staff. I gave a speech maybe five or six years ago and said, "The one thing that is dead in this world is company loyalty." Doesn't exist. When I started, you went to work for IBM or AT&T, they kept you until the end. If you were bad, they put you in a corner and didn't promote you, but you weren't fired. Nowadays, anybody will fire you. In Tokyo, for example, We used to bury our employees. Part of the deal.

**You waited until they were dead first.**

Oh, yes. We waited until they were dead, we didn't bury them before that!

**As a courtesy.**

As a courtesy, we let them die first! But the difference is, any company can fire you. So the difference of understanding, a lot of companies are not very good at really understanding their own employees. Now it's all this corporate social responsibility, having clients the employers really want – because there is no question that CSR is significant. More and more people will now buy from companies that they think is doing something worthwhile in addition to having a good product.

**I work for a lot of chief executives, and I think nowadays, one of the things that social media has done is, you can't segment and delineate audiences like you used to do. So for example, back in the old days, a chief executive would have a staff newsletter so he could put a staff bias on what he or she was going to say. There would be a customer newsletter, then he would go on the television... now, if you follow the chief executive on Twitter, of any organisation, everyone is reading him or her. Every tweet could be read by a customer, a supplier, a member of staff... he can't kind of optimise the message, he or she has to say it to everyone.**

He does. It's more important that he understands... one of the problems is that when I started, the chief executive was god. No-one questions him, no-one did anything – even the man who was in charge of PR internally was not an important job – no-one left a big consultancy to go in-house. Nowadays it's the opposite. In-house people are paid much more, and they really know – and the difference is, not enough of the chief executives go into training for what their message is going to be – because it's the message that counts. I don't believe a thing called 'media training' any more; when I train chief executives, it's 'message training'. And what is the message you want? Not enough chief executives really work to make sure they know what the message is, know what the training is, and know how to answer questions. For

example, because I once wrote something on this, there's no such thing as a stupid question, there's only a stupid answer – that's what a very wise man said, hundreds of years ago. So it doesn't matter what in the world you are asked, it's how you answer it – no matter who the audience is. And not enough people prepare themselves to make sure that their answers are the ones that they want to get to the audience.

**Do you think that's quite a burden on the modern chief exec then, given that there's two roles now? One is they've got to run the company, but two, they've got to be an ambassador in the media?**

Sure, it's a burden – but life is a burden now. Everything is a burden in today's world! It's not like it was 100 years ago.

**I wanted to ask you about how the PR industry has changed. I mean, it's clearly changed because of technology and it's booming for a variety of reasons, but in terms of the day to day, is it the kind of same thing, really – are you trying to win journalists over?**

One of the funny changes, in the US and in England, where I lecture quite a bit, 70% of all students and PR are women. Seventy per cent. So you're getting a change in that way I think, maybe that's why Cameron saw that. Seventy per cent of women. Nowadays, the demands – as I said before – are much greater. Firms will have five or six different PR firms! When I started, if you hired Burson, you hired Hill + Knowlton, you hired whoever, you had them for all your business. Now, you get someone like Johnson and Johnson, they might have six different PR firms! So their needs, the doing your homework, and really understanding the customer and the needs is great. Social networking is no question – you don't make a pitch unless you have somebody who really, really knows social networking. So you have far more greater things that are needed. So it's a tougher business, it's a more demanding business, but you are able to accomplish it if you really are as professional... it's much more professional than it was in my day. It was good, but today it's far, far more professional.

**Do you think social, as you've just said, has changed everything, then? Because it's not just newspapers and magazines any more, is it? You've got to look after Twitter accounts, get Facebook likes and so on.**

Sure – no question. It's been... the biggest change in PR has been social media for any companies and for consultancies, no question. It's another world now.

**I think one of the things I have learned over the last few years is, I used to do Twitter and tick a box and say, "Yes, my client is on Twitter." But now, I**

**actively use it to engage with journalists and build relationships – it's not just tweeting for its own sake, you can actually build a relationship with a journalist over Twitter.**

No question about it. And getting these... relationships, as I said, are the key. As I said, you've got to perceive what he's feeling about either you personally, or the company, or whatever it is, and how can you change that perception? If it's wrong, you know, he doesn't appreciate what a good job you've been doing, or how important your client is in that particular field.

**Don't you think it's a bit ironic that given us PR professionals, as it were, manage reputation, manage image, is the reputation of our industry itself is so poor with the public.**

That's... it's funny. As I said, I've got awards from the IPR, and I started the PRCA, but the one thing I say that PR will never be a profession. It'll be more professional. The main reason is, if you want to hire me, as long as I have a telephone, like in the old days with Max Clifford, if you had an affair with a member of parliament, if you went to Max you were going to get a lot of money, because it didn't matter what people thought of more, or what the PR profession thought of Max Clifford in that period. You want to hire me, you can hire me. Doctors, lawyers, you can be disbarred, disband... you know, accountants and so on. But as long as I've got a phone and you want to use me, you can. So PR will be more professional, and it has becoming... one of the main things is it's become so much more professional than it was when I started, but it's not a "profession" per se.

**Do you think it should be?**

No.

**I've come across wrong 'uns over the years, PR professionals who have stitched their clients up or taken the money, I mean, surely we ought to have some kind of regulatory framework in the same way that a doctor or a dentist does.**

You can have that, but you still will never be a profession when anybody can be in the business. Everybody cannot be a doctor. And I can't think, "Oh, I don't have to wait on you because I feel like being a doctor." Or I go and see the judge, "I'm in the mood to be a lawyer today." That's not the way it is. But anybody can be a PR man! And that's why yes, you can get tougher and so on, but there is no way that it will really be a profession, as profession is meant. But *professional*, it's far, far more professional than it has ever been, for the benefit of the clients who are hiring.

**It's a bit like driving. I passed my driving test 20 years ago and if I took it now I would completely fail it, I'm certain – and it's probably the same if there was some sort of entrance exam for PR! I would probably disagree with the question and have to walk out.**

But I say, even if they had an entrance exam, and you want to hire – they can't stop you from hiring me because the PRCA or the IPR has an entrance exam, no. If you want to use me, you can use me – period. And that's it.

**So do you think that times are only going to get better and better for PR, then?**

It's doing very well, yes. I think it'll keep improving, and it's not because I'm in the business, no. I'm optimistic about it; I think it will continue to become more and more professional, that I believe.

**It's a symbiotic relationship, isn't it? The media depend on us for stories and we depend on them to cover it, but with a dwindling media, do you think that's going to have an effect? Because there are already fewer and fewer magazines, newspapers and so on.**

Public relations is not press relations any more. Your customers, and how you reach your customers, and how you reach doctors, or how you reach other people, *that* is where it's happening. For press relations has become much less significant than it was when I started, when 90% of the business was press relations, you were working more for clippings – now it's a whole different thing. I mean, that's why you've got corporate social responsibility! Working with clients to do it, to have corporate social responsibility. Companies go out and now go to Asia and see their suppliers to make sure they are treating their staff well, or they are not going to use them – and that's what's been happening more and more. So there is no question, in fact I think it was The Economist that said, "No annual report comes out today where corporate social responsibility, or what they'd done and what they have done is not included in it." So there are other things that are far different from getting publicity – that is the key today. Public affairs – I mean, how do you deal with government? What are you telling government? Who are you seeing in government? A lot of government PRs and banks and so on... so it's not the clippings, it's who you are dealing with and what messages are you getting across to them. How are you training your clients to get those messages, that are right, of course? So there's lots and lots of work for PR people. They are working much harder, I'll tell you today – I'm stunned when I go into the Burson Marsteller office at 6.30pm and you think 90% of the staff are still there working.

**Sometimes I talk to my clients, and they don't want to get into the newspapers or the media for doing something, and my advice to them is, "Don't do it, then." Why do something and then try and manage the media implications of**

**it? Did you find that over the years you were actually almost not advising them on their PR, but actually advising them on their core business?**

Well, that's the key! I mean, doing it – forgetting the press, you're doing it to increase your business. It's to get customers, or get financing, you know, or get legal support – what do you want to accomplish? That's the key. And you help them accomplish it if you think it's right. I mean, if you think it's wrong, that's another story. But you help them accomplish it, and that is the key.

**What advice would you give someone just starting out in their career. Would you tell them to avoid PR these days? Or if they wanted to do it, what advice would you give them?**

What do you mean, avoid PR?

**In terms of maybe getting another job in a different industry.**

Oh, you mean a person going in? No – I think PR has a great future. I wouldn't tell anybody to avoid it if that's what they want to do. If a person wants to be a doctor, I wouldn't say, "Don't be a doctor, go and be a plumber," if that's what he wants.

**But if you want to be a plumber or a doctor there is an established route into that where you have to get certain qualifications at certain stages, and as you've already said, PR is quite open. What would you advise someone at the beginning of their career to do to get that first rung on the ladder in PR?**

Well, I'll tell you, the real key is trying to understand if you have specific skills that you are particularly good at, like I say, in healthcare. For example, you know health very much, you have a background in medicine. You decide why you want to be in there, and the difference is, the key is starting off, becoming a trainee or an intern somewhere, and learning the business from the people above you, and making sure that when you are there you are being taught the best possible way. Now, I would lecture all the new employees, and I would say, "One, and very, very important, every one of you is not good enough to be the chairman. You're not 10 out of 10 – but you might be seven out of ten. You owe it to be seven out of 10. The company owes it to you that you can become seven, and if not, you should leave and go somewhere else. Because if they will not allow you to be as good as you possibly can, go somewhere else." But you've got to try and be, and people should be reading more than they do really, because there's so much happening in the world.

**Sometimes I don't have time to read the papers, I'm that busy!**

I mean, there are so many different things, and really getting to understand your clients – and as I say about perceptions. What are the perceptions of their customers, of their staff, of the government, of the financial community? And how do

you modify or change these perceptions, or enhance them if they're good? Well, perceptions are not bad, and that's really the key.

**What are you doing at the moment then, Bob? I mean, you're 82, you're still at the office, are you? What's your day to day, if you don't mind me asking?**

I don't mind you asking anything! That's why I'm here! The difference is, I still work for Burson, I'm an advisor – in some ways they're a client – so I work with them... and now it's more lecturing, so I'm starting to write more lectures and so on. I think I've got about eight or nine scheduled in the fall.

**Are you still active in the office with fee-earning work?**

Every now and again I'll get an assignment, like I did for a client, I was training... and one company was picking a PR firm, that wasn't a kind of business for Burson, and they had me meet with the board, and I questioned the company that was doing it, and we reviewed it and everything, so... every now and then I'll have a minor assignment, but no-one's going to want to hire me full time – I'm 82!

**I don't think you'd want to work full time, would you? I want to retire next year - at 40!**

Er... no, I wouldn't want to retire – my wife wouldn't want me home all that time! I think she gets the best break ever, she gets rid of me! I say mornings, I pretty much don't go in, it's mainly afternoons, and also advice – a lot of young people come to see me. I do a lot of that. People will ask me as a favour, their nephew or this, or somebody... so I do see loads and loads, or else help them write their resumes – because one of the things I'm saying in Perception, all universities want me to lecture on getting a job – and the key to getting a job, the perception. And you wouldn't believe the resumes that people write are so bad... and the letters! I get letters addressed to Mr Leek, Me Leap, Mr Leach – they know more about me than I thought they did, you know?

**Did they get the job after that?**

No. And this is a true story, at Burson-Marsteller – I got a letter with a good resume, it was a good letter, it was addressed to Robert Leaf, chairman of Berstein-Marshmallow. Someone had played a joke on him and told him the name of the company was Berstein-Marshmallow.

**And he didn't do any due diligence.**

He didn't study it. So that alone, that he wouldn't check it out, meant that I wasn't interested. But how they write their resumes... because nowadays people

graduating, they send the same resume to 20 companies. Now, Hill+Knowlton has a different problem than Burson, and Adelman has a different problem than Weber Shandwick, and if you're sending out... you want to say, what are their needs? How do you fit their needs? And that's not only in PR – when you get a job, and when you go for the interview. I'm always impressed when I'm interviewing someone and they know something about me. "Oh, you went to University of Missouri? My cousin went there." The fact that they knew the university I went to and so on, the minute I really feel that they have done their homework and have a knowledge base, their level as far as possibly being employed – and I have hired thousands of people – goes up.

**So do you think that of the decades that you have worked in PR, that people are taking more and more shortcuts? That they're not doing that research, whereas they used to do? Is that what it is?**

No. No. They're not taking shortcuts. It's just some are doing more, but their needs are greater. I mean, so... when I was looking for a job, I just sent a letter in, and they were looking for someone in Burson's mail, and fie – that was it. But nowadays, the hiring is much, much tougher because there are a lot of people going into it. When I first started, PR... if you told your professor and you went to a good university and you went into PR, he would say, "Schweinhund!" and he would throw you out in the street! Nowadays you get letters from the leading universities, "I have this wonderfully bright student, do you have any internships open?" So PR is acceptable all over to get the kind of jobs from anybody, but going for the job, writing the right resume, judging it, not sending the same letter to every single company, can be the key to you getting the job.

**I suppose the final question from me, Bob... tell us about your book – what was the motivation for writing it, what's in it etc.**

Well, it's very... well, the reason I wrote it, and I'm not going to write another book, I don't want another book. The difference is that I felt that this was the key to where the business was going – and it was fun, because opening in China, opening in Russia and all of these places, and the anecdotes and what it was like and so on... it's a fun book, and that's not trying to sell it, it's not a text in any way. It's textual in telling you, for example, how is the best way to answer questions, how to get a job, it's in there – but it's more about how you manage perceptions as the key to your success in the future, and I thought it was significant, and it was good that they just reprinted it, I'm just very, very pleased with it.

**How's it selling?**

I'll tell you, publishing today, the publishing industry is in terrible shape – there's no question about it. And so... one woman just had a book published and they printed 750 copies, that's all they printed. So they started mine, they printed 3,000, they all

sold out, so they've just reprinted it now, but now it's a soft cover, but it's as hard as a hard cover is. And so...

### **Who's buying it?**

Well, certainly the universities, students. Because the thing about it, I'm not interested in this to make money, so even though the original book was £15, I mean, £25, and then it's £18, I give it to any student for £10.

### **Sorry, we should say to our listeners, the book is called *The Art of Perception: Memoirs of a Life in PR* ([corr](#)).**

And I think... it's interesting, because there's fun things, like travelling through Tibet on the top of the mountains, and things like going into the Dalai Lama's bathroom.

### **Swashbuckling adventure!**

Yes! So I mean, there's fun things that I said about Russia and the Middle East and so on, and what happened, what had to be done, so it's not all cheerful, like once in the Middle East we were working for the government at that time and we were doing the tourist board, and one time, some of the very anti-wild, of the Egyptians, went to one of the leading temples and came in and murdered all the people in the temple, and they were mainly tourists – French, Dutch – publically disembowelled a woman and put a message to Mubarak – it was the best thing that ever happened, because even religious groups then became more pro-Mubarak. But we had a train... everybody cancelled every trip to Egypt, and we had to train them in crisis management, how to you manage this crisis? In six months they were back to their normal tourism. So there are stories like that, you know, that you don't want to leap with glee over it, but it's interesting stories that I think that the readers will buy it for.

### **Do you think you'll ever retire?**

No. because I'll tell you truthfully, believe it or not, you will live longer if you don't. Even cab drivers. Doctors say to cab drivers, "When you retire, work at least two days a week." If you do nothing, for some reason, doing nothing, the mind affects the body, and if you keep active you will live longer – and I'm not going to live to be 250, but...

### **You might do!**

Well, I'll settle for 150, you know, I'm not greedy.

**Bob, it's an honour to have you in the studio, thank you for joining us.**

Oh, that's... because of you people, here's what I will do. Anybody who wants to order the book, it's £18 now, they can have it for £10. I'm not in this, as I said, to make money, and because you people have been so nice to me here from the time I first talked to you, so anybody who wants it can have it for £10.

**Thank you ever so much, Bob! I've really, really enjoyed this, and it's been very, very informative.**

It's a pleasure to be here.