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FOR BURSON MARSTELLER CORPORATION

PROGRAM A.M. NEW YORK

STATION WABC-TV

DATE JUNE 9, 1970

8:15AM

CITY NEW YORK

INTERVIEW WITH ELIAS BUCHWALD

JOHN BARTHOLOMEW TUCKER: Our guest now - let me tell you an air conditioner story - and maybe you've had the same experience. This happened - this didn't happen recently -it was a couple of years ago.

My wife and I went out to the store and bought an air conditioner. And the guy said, "By the way, you know, it's guaranteed." And I said, "I really don't care. I hope it works, that's all." I'm sure you've had this feeling.

Got home, and I turned the first knob, and it broke off in my fingers. And the second knob broke off. And then the thing -- three knobs broke off. I couldn't use the air conditioner. And I had one of my rages, you know. I said, "Who cares whether it s guaranteed or not, I wanted it to work."

So I took it back to the store, and I got the old thing about well, you got to call the company, and do you have your receipt, and all that. And by the time the summer was over, we had the thing fixed. That's my experience; I'm sure you had one just like that.

So my next guest is Mr. Elias Buchwald. He's president of Burson Marsteller - and I'll ask him to pronounce that later! - a public relations firm. Mr. Buchwald's been concerned about the problems of the consumer for about four years now.

Did I pronounce the name of your firm...?

ELIAS BUCHWALD: Perfectly, John.

TUCKER: Oh, good. Thanks for sitting around so long, and joining us...

BUCHWALD: I enjoyed the show, it's great.

TUCKER: They're very lovely women, aren't they.

BUCHWALD: Yeah.

TUCKER: Back me up in something - did you see them before the show, what they were doing?

BUCHWALD: No, I missed it. I was dying to see the embarrassment (?).

TUCKER: How can a man who's in public relations, and obviously represents large companies - don't you?

BUCHWALD: Yeah.

TUCKER: Now how can you still be concerned about the people who consume the products of those large companies you represent?

BUCHWALD: Well, what better reason to be consumed -- I mean, concerned? They're our clients' customers. And we're interested in both sides of the fence, so to speak. You know, a company can't grow and develop unless people are happy doing business with it.

And part of my job, I think, is to alert people in business and industry about how the consumer feels.

TUCKER: So you still have those large corporations as customers?

BUCHWALD: Oh yeah.

TUCKER: Are you doing a public relations job on me now? I mean, are you really just trying to smooth things over for the large companies?

BUCHWALD Well, on the contrary. I think, you know, if a public relations man does his job, he needles the people he works for to do the right thing. But one thing ain't going to work, and that is to paper over a bad situation.

Like your air conditioner. You know, if they write you a nice letter that was printed by a computer, that's going to make you twice as sore as if somebody were able to do something about it.

My feeling is that if business and industry are going to keep the good will of their customers, they got to say to themselves once and for all, we're going to commit the time, and money, and effort to be sure that meet the consumers' needs.

TUCKER: That's a little bit of a speech there, though. Do the companies really care? I mean, really. They don't, do they?

BUCHWALD: Well, I'll tell you, they can't afford not to, for one. For two, you know, the company is made up of people too. And for every story that you have about your air conditioner, I'm sure there's a person who's got a complaint about some big car that he bought, or some golf clubs that don't work, or some lawn mower, you know.

So we're all consumers. And every man in industry, and like me and you, have stories like that, you know. It's funny, this seems to be the age of power, black power, and student power. And what we have with the consumer is consumer power.

By God, people like us have decided once and for all that we want things to work right, that when we make a complaint we don't want Susan Snip, whose name was typed out by some automated system, you know, to be the answer. We want to deal with real people. And...

TUCKER: I know that's what we want, but we're not doing it. You know, what you say - I have a Mr. Sims who services me, and I knew he's a computer, on my credit card. I used to have a Mr. Burns. I don't know, I guess they bought a new machine, now it's Mr. Sims.

I want that, but I'm not getting any place, and nobody's really getting any place.

BUCHWALD: Well, one of the good things...

TUCKER: See, what they do is hire a guy like you to go on and say, "By golly, we got to do it." But still nothing's happening.

BUCHWALD: Well, to some degree it hasn't happened yet. But a number of companies, for instance, have appointed a guy they call an ombudsman. This is the guy whose function in the company is to say, "Don't tell me about your production problems, and don't tell me about your marketing problems. The only guy I'm interested in is the guy to whom you're selling the product." He's inside the company, mind you.

And so is job is to see to it that a company does become responsive, that there is somebody around who doesn't have to go through the red tape and doesn't care about the systems, but tries to get a real answer to a person's needs.

Now this is beginning to happen. You know, a company wants to be liked, it wants to sell its products. The difference is that companies before were only concerned about how they make it, and how they distribute it. But they're not concerned about what happens outside.

But once they start putting a price tag and saying, "By God, it's important for us to have somebody who'll service the product, or answer a complaint, as it is some hotshot engineer who'll make it," that's when action will happen.

TUCKER: Let me give our phone number. If you want to call in here and talk to Mr. Buchwald - I'm sure you do - it's 870 9100. Give us some calls.

BUCHWALD: And incidentally, I'm an engineer, so...

TUCKER: Mr. Buchwald's an engineer. But I bought a television set - this is not in the dim, dark past - just six months ago. I bought the set - it conked out, right? I had paid in cash for it. The company came to fix it, and tried to sell me, and in fact came back a week later and sold my wife when I wasn't there, an insurance policy to repair the television set that was a week old.

Now I'm sure they have an ombudsman, right?

BUCHWALD: Well, I doubt if that particular company does.

But a number of companies do. And, of course, that's exactly the kind of situation that companies, and industries and manufacturers have to deal with.

TUCKER: Excuse me, our phones are all lighting up. Everybody wants to talk to you. They've got better questions than I have, so let's try it.

You're on the air. Mr. Buchwald's right here.

WOMAN CALLER: Yes, good morning. I would like to know, how is it possible that the same item, within the same chain stores, varies so much in price?

TUCKER: We'll find out right now. Go ahead.

BUCHWALD: Well, of course, I'm no expert on chain store merchandise. But let me point this out to you. I think this may be accurate. You know, it costs differently to do business in different areas. You get a place, for instance, where you've got a high incidence of shoplifting, or robbery, or accidents, or what have you, and the insurance company's going to charge the guy more money. That means it costs him more money to do business, and I guess that's reflected in the difference in price.

TUCKER: Okay, let's try another one. A.M. New York, you're on the air.

WOMAN CALLER: Oh, good morning. I'd like to ask Mr. Buchwald if there is anyone in President Nixon's Administration that's taken over Betty Furness' job that we can go to with consumer problems or advice?

TUCKER: Good, thanks.

BUCHWALD: Mrs. Virginia Knauer.

TUCKER: Mrs. Virginia Knauer, we answered that, okay.

CALLER: How do we get in touch with her?

TUCKER: Pardon?

CALLER: How do we get in touch with her?

BUCHWALD: You can write Mrs. Virginia Knauer, Washington, D.C. And by God she'll get the letter, I'll bet you.

TUCKER: How do you spell her last name?

BUCHWALD: K-N-A-U-E-R.

CALLER: Thank you very much.

TUCKER: Thank you, nice person. A.M. New York, and you're on the air. You were on the air. All right - well, she went out to write Mrs. Knauer, I guess. All right, you're on the air.

WOMAN CALLER: Yes, I ordered a bedroom set nine months ago, and the company has never replied to our bedroom set. We have paid three hundred and eighty dollars. We don't know what to do.

TUCKER: Okay, let's see if we can get an answer.

BUCHWALD: Well, I assume that you bought it in New York City. And, you know, New York City has a very active woman who's the equivalent of the national Virginia Knauer - Mrs. Bess Myerson Grant. And she is very responsive to consumer complaints.

And my suggestion to you would be to drop her a note, or

maybe even call her office. And if she can't do anything about it, I'm certain that she'll tell you how you can go about getting help.

TUCKER: Very good. May I say, if you can't remember the address of Mrs. Bess Myerson Grant, just write her in care of Eyewitness News here at Channel 7.

BUCHWALD: Sure.

TUCKER: Because she works closely with Eyewitness News. Let's see what we have here. Another one? Okay - A.M. New York, you're on the air.

WOMAN CALLER: I'd like to ask Mr. Buchwald, my husband bought a Volkswagon and we're having a lot of trouble with it. And the engine fell out, and everything else.

TUCKER: No names, please.

CALLER Oh, sorry. And he wanted to write, like, a few letters to put a little pressure on the service, because we're not getting any -- we're not getting any help from the service department. Who should I write to?

BUCHWALD: Okay, I'll give you my professional secret. When you have this unnamed automobile trouble, or trouble with any product my suggestion is, you always find out the name of the highest ranking guy there. You must start right at the top.

He may not do anything about it, but he'll buck it to the right guy. Because when you get a note from the president of the company, or the marketing vice president, you move. So that's what you do.



CALLER: Okay, thank you.

TUCKER: That may be the best advice you've given us all day. It's all been good. But that's good, write the highest guy. I guess we have time for one more. Here's our last one. You're on the air, the last call of the day.

WOMAN CALLER: Yes, my question is, Mr. Buchwald, does it pay to repair an electrical appliance once it is malfunctioning?

BUCHWALD: Well, that is a technical question, and I'll put on my engineering hat. To answer that question, I would have to say I balance off the cost of a brand new electrical piece, or fixing it. And if it costs less to buy a new one, or not very much more, I buy a new one.

TUCKER: Okay, and thank you for calling. We've been talking with Elias Buchwald, president of Burson Marsteller Public Relations. And a very spirited talk, I must say.

I just saw a note - I can call you Bucky, it said. So, Bucky, it's been -- no, you got to come back. You gave some good advice. Stick around and have some coffee with us afterwards.

BUCHWALD: Okay, thank you, John.