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About New York

Selling Soap to Children and Hairnets to Women

By WILLIAM E. GEIST

Edward Bernays originated the field of public relations about 60 years ago, and when he looks about him now and sees all that he has wrought, sometimes he thinks maybe he should have gone bowling instead.

The elfin 83-year-old was showing little remorse yesterday, however, accepting a plaque for his achievements from John Brademas, president of New York University — where in 1923 Mr. Bernays taught the first course anywhere in public relations — and basking in the applause of a lecture hall filled with the next generation of highly trained public relations people. "Image is the most important thing you have," said one of the students. "Face it."

Mr. Bernays, whose clients have included Presidents Coolidge, Wilson, Hoover and Eisenhower, as well as Edison, Freud, Cereso, Nijinsky, scores of the largest corporations and many foreign countries, told the students the story of his campaign to change the negative opinion children held toward soap by establishing an Ivory soap sculpture contest that soon had some 22 million children carving.

Early on in his career, after he had done propaganda work for the Allies during World War I, it dawned on Mr. Bernays that, hey, he could mold public opinion. The dawn of public relations was at hand.

Press agents already existed — the famous Ivy Lee among them — but Mr. Ber-

nays thought beyond press releases to trying actually to change the tides of public opinion — be it about bacon, bananas, Lithuania, a world war or Venida Hair Nets.

"Once," he said, nearly shuddering at the thought, "there was no public relations, and public opinion was at the mercy of the whimsical forces of chance. Businessmen, were at the mercy of these same forces."

Mr. Bernays told the story of Irene Castle, dancer and idol, who got a bob haircut, and millions of women stormed the beauty parlors to copy the short style. "Hairnet makers were in a state of panic," he recalled. "Hair-pin manufacturers were laying off workers. The hair comb industry was in disarray." Taking emergency action, Mr. Bernays arranged for safety experts to issue warnings of — precisely — what could happen if a woman went to work without a hairnet and got her hair caught in the machinery. Health experts came forward to speak of the horrors of food con-

tamination if cooks and waitresses worked without hairnets. Laws were hastily passed in many states making hairnets mandatory.

For the American Tobacco Company, Mr. Bernays discovered that women were not smoking Lucky Strikes because the green packages clashed with almost every color of women's garments. But the president of American Tobacco refused to change the package, and so Mr. Bernays set about trying to make green the predominant color of women's fashion. By several accounts, he succeeded, after holding a "Green Ball" for the most famous of socialites, after having green garments featured in Vogue and Harpers Bazaar, and then convincing manufacturers to make green the new color. "All things are possible in New York," he said, "which was and is the center of communications."

Women bought more cigarettes, just as they did after he made smoking cigarettes in public a feminist issue. Long before "You've Come A Long Way Baby," Mr.

Bernays arranged for the debutantes in several cities to gather in public places at a set hour to light up their Luckies — also known as Torches of Freedom.

When research linking cigarette smoking to cancer was revealed, he turned around and worked to have cigarette commercials banned from television. "That's the P.R. game," he said with a shrug.

His modus operandi from the start was obtaining endorsements from "opinion leaders" as well as favorable results from experiments and surveys conducted by doctors and panels of experts. His in-depth research and applied psychology was all rather startling in the early days as he was criticized for manipulating public opinion. It was called "the new science of ballyhoo."

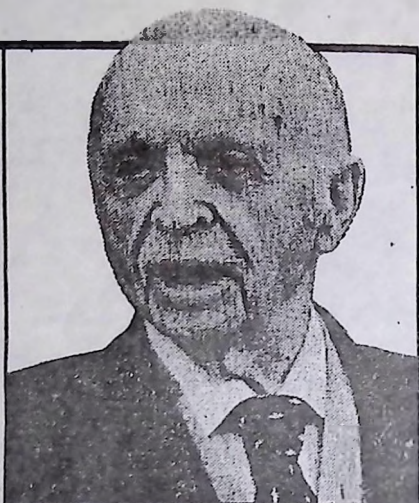
What was the poor unorganized and helpless consumer, the poor voter, to do as the torrential, sophisticated propaganda came raining down upon him?

Mr. Bernays is a nephew of Freud — Mr. Bernays has 52 letters from him — and there are those who contend that Mr. Bernays has had nearly as much influence on life in this century as his famous uncle.

Sharp as a tack at 83, Mr. Bernays still does some work for clients, recently on behalf of the nuclear freeze movement.

He allows as how he may have created something of a monster with this public relations. "Everyone has a press agent now," he said, "or a media consultant or

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Edward Bernays

communications director or whatever you want to call it. Some of Nixon's people who went to jail called themselves public relations people. Image has become everything. Look what's happened in politics."

"Sometimes," he said, "it seems sort of like discovering a medicine to cure a disease, and then finding out that so much of it is being administered that people are getting sick from the overdoses."