

'Father of Public Relations' Not Idle Man Who Brought You Freud, Caruso and Others, Stays Busy

He's been called 'U.S. Publicist No. 1' and at age 91, he's still working to uphold the reputation. Edward Bernays, the 'father of public relations,' is now dealing with the problem of the generation gap with a lifelong goal still to mild: inform and educate.

By Clayton Haswell
The Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Without him, the great Caruso might not have become the least of the land. Sigmund Freud's work might not have been translated for American readers for another decade.

A generation of children might have grown up with dirty faces, and a generation of women might have gone on smoking cigarettes behind the shed. His clients included the famous and powerful: presidents Coolidge, Wilson, Hoover and Eisenhower, Thomas Edison, Eleanor Roosevelt and dancer Nijinsky.

Those he rejected were known for other reasons: Adolf Hitler, Gen. Francisco Franco, and former Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

At 91, Edward Bernays, the 'father of public relations,' has no intention of slowing down.

Very little has been done to bridge the generational gap, Bernays said over a glass of burgundy in his book-lined Cambridge study. "When you consider that by the year 2040, up to 40 percent of the nation's population will be over 45, that's a problem."

As a problem he's chosen to tackle for the last years of his life — and a challenge to continue to use the uncanny insights and revolutionary methods that helped him change the face of American public opinion in the 20th century.

His method has never been complicated. "I never visited newspapers," he said. "I created circumstances."

During his lifetime, public relations has become a multimillion-dollar field. But when Bernays arrived on the scene before World War I, there were only press agents whose reputations were sometimes unenviable. Opinion research was unknown.

In those days, public opinion was considered philosophy. There was no psychology, he said. Sociology was in its infancy, and Walter Lippmann had just begun to define what Bernays referred to as "the American trial consciousness."

Bernays perceived at an early age that opinion could be molded. A bibliography of books and articles commenting on the campaigns he engineered fills nearly 800 pages, and lists more than 4,000 separate names.

He reminisces about them. "Dodge was coming out with a new automobile in 1912, and they asked me what I could do to bring it to the public's attention," he recalled.

"Those were the days of silent films, and it occurred to me that no one had ever heard Charlie Chaplin's voice. So I got Chaplin and Gloria Swanson together. Bernays arranged for the two to do a radio commercial, but not before taking out a highly publicized policy with Lloyd's of London insuring the star of silent movies against stage fright."

"When the time came, everyone stayed home to listen to Dodge Hour," he said.

Bernays, an avowed feminist, is not without regrets. His campaign for the American Tobacco Co. is one of them.

"Tobacco was before anybody knew cigarettes were carcinogenic. I later worked to get tobacco advertising off radio and television to ease my guilt complex," he said.

The task at hand in 1934 was to break the taboo against women smoking in public.

"The first thing I did was go to a psychiatrist. He told me that for women, cigarettes represented man's inhumanity to women. So my idea was to get women to show their equality."

Bernays contacted debutantes across the nation. At the appointed hour, hundreds marched to places like the Boston Common, Union Square in San Francisco and Central Park in New York to light up "tokens of freedom."

Freud, his mother's brother, sent him a manuscript while Bernays was



Edward Bernays, 91, shown in his study, has no intention of slowing down

in Paris accompanying Woodrow Wilson to the Peace Conference after World War I. Though Freud's books had been translated into English in Europe, they had not yet been published in America.

"Freud sent me a copy of *Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*, and I took it and talked to a publisher. I knew, Freud wrote me later that royalty money from that book was what helped him survive" during Austria's period of rampant inflation in the late 1920s.

Years later, after Freud became known throughout the world as the creator of psychoanalysis, Bernays came upon a carton of letters in his basement written to him by his niece. The letters have been estimated to be worth more than \$100,000. Rather than sell them, Bernays kept them in his safe deposit box.

The soap campaign he designed for Procter and Gamble in the early 1920s was one of his favorites.

"The simple fact was that kids cried when they got soap in their eyes. Soap was something they hated. To change that, Bernays persuaded schools across the country to participate in soap sculpture contests."

"It made it possible for the soap they hated to become something they loved, something that would gratify their creative instincts. Within a year, 23 million kids were involved in soap sculpture," he said.

Born Nov. 22, 1891, in Vienna, Bernays came to the United States a year later. He married Doris Fleischman in 1924, a marital and business partnership that lasted until her death in 1980. The marriage created headlines when Ms. Fleischman kept her maiden name, and again when she became the first married American woman to receive a passport in her maiden name. The public relations counseling firm

they founded together was enormously successful.

"For a long time, he was known as 'U.S. Publicist No. 1,'" said Dr. Otto Lerbinger, chairman of the school of public relations at Boston University.

"He was so creative, people sought him out — not just because of what he could do for them but to keep their competitors away from him," Lerbinger said. "He always came up with a different angle."

Lerbinger credited Bernays for teaching the first university course in public relations at New York University in 1923.

"Even today when he speaks, the students swarm over him," Lerbinger said. "He's just a remarkable personality."

Bernays dresses simply and lives modestly in an 1850s wood-frame house a few blocks from Harvard University. Despite his diminutive 5-foot-5, 125-pound frame and soft-spoken disposition, he gives the impression he could inspire a football team as easily as a publicity campaign.

And he could say "no."

"I turned down Hitler, Somoza and Franco because, in public relations, the public interest — rather than pecuniary reward — is the primary concern," he said. "I did so even though, in the case of Franco and Somoza, the U.S. had diplomatic relations with their countries at the time."

Bernays said Hitler approached him through an intermediary shortly after taking power in 1933.

"He wanted me to do some work for the German railroad or one of the concerns he was in charge of," Bernays said. "The interesting thing is that at the time, there were people that dismissed him as just another politician."

"I thought the man had an aberration. There was a Great Depression,

and he was using Jews as a scapegoat for the situation."

But Bernays may not have been altogether successful in preventing Hitler from using his ideas. A correspondent for the Hearst chain interviewed Joseph Goebbels several years later and reported to Bernays that he found a copy of Bernays' 1923 book *Propaganda on the Nazi propaganda minister's desk*.

Looking back on a lifetime shared with the famous and the powerful, Bernays said his greatest accomplishment was his contribution to the understanding of how public opinion is formed.

"In American society," he said, "it is vital that every institution adjust to public needs, hopes, desires, aspirations. The only way this can be done is through research. The total adjustment between the institution or product and its public must be discovered."