

PERSONALITY PROFILE

On November 22 this year, Edward L. Bernays, the most heralded contender for the title 'The Father of Public Relations' celebrates his 100th birthday.

As he looks back upon a career during which he has counseled several U.S. Presidents and conducted public relations campaigns that have helped change the very fabric of American life, he remains passionate about what he believes to be perhaps the most important crusade of his long and illustrious career: the campaign to achieve a higher level of recognition for the profession he has practiced since 1919, when he formed one of the first public relations counseling firms with his wife, Doris E. Fleischman.

Even the briefest conversation with Ed Bernays reveals that his mind remains as sharp as ever — one reason why a select group of clients still pay \$1,000 an hour for his counsel — and that much of that sharpness has been turned on the public relations industry itself, and the issue of its flagging credibility.

"A few months ago a young woman called me up, told me she was in public relations and asked whether she could come and see me. She had heard I sometimes gave career advice," Bernays says. "She was about 28 years old and she appeared to be a very intelligent and serious young woman, and I asked her what she did. She said she was in public relations. I said I didn't ask her what she was in, I asked her what she did. It turned out she gave out circulars in Harvard Square."

Bernays uses the anecdote to illustrate the fact that distresses him more than any other: that anyone, regardless of qualifications, can call themselves a public relations practitioner, and that this ease of access into the business attracts a number of "nitwits and frauds" who are damaging the credibility of the entire profession.

He builds on this argument to call for the licensing of public relations people, raising the business to the level of a profession. It is a call he has been sending out for more than two decades and which, it seems, he is now unlikely to see heeded.

If this crusade does fail, it will be one of very few disappointments in a more than 80 year career, a career capped in 1988 when *Life* magazine included Ed Bernays among such illustrious names as Albert Einstein and Martin Luther King as one of the 100 most influential Americans of the 20th century.

A glance at the Bernays client list reads like a Who's Who of that century. Bernays advised Presidents Calvin Coolidge, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower. For Coolidge, the challenge was to reverse a cold and aloof image, and Bernays' solution was to invite Al Jolson and selected vaudevillians to breakfast with the President, culminating in the famous headline 'President Nearly Laughs.' For Hoover, Bernays helped restore confidence in the U.S. economy after the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

Business clients included Henry Ford, George Washington Hill and Henry Luce. Celebrities who sought Bernays' help ranged from Enrico Caruso, Nijinsky and Samuel Goldwyn to Thomas Edison and Eleanor Roosevelt. If you include the clients Bernays turned down, world leaders such as Hitler, Franco and Somoza — his declared belief being that public relations should serve the public interest — it is clear why he remains the most famous PR man in history.

While the client list is impressive, the programs he conducted for

Father's Day: Bernays Hits 100

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them were often revolutionary, changing the nature of the relationship between business and the communities in which it operated and often going to the heart of the American way of life.

If it wasn't for Bernays, for example, we might still find it difficult to travel by road from New York to San Francisco: working for Mack Trucks, he campaigned for a better long-distance road network. We would not be able to buy beer in our supermarkets: he helped the industry regain its respectability after the repeal of Prohibition.

He also assisted the tobacco industry in popularizing smoking among women, a cause that might not seem quite so noble today, but which at the time was more about equality of the sexes than it was about health concerns.

And he was involved in issues of racial equality and workplace discrimination long before the '60s.

"One of my clients was a large bread company that had its headquarters in Harlem," he recalls. "I asked them how much business they did among the 500,000 Blacks in Harlem and they said they didn't sell a single loaf in Harlem. I examined the situation and found that not one of the people working at the plant was Black. The employment manager was prejudiced. I pointed out that this was not a sound policy, and the company began to employ Blacks. Almost overnight their business increased by 500,000 individuals."

“It is the creation of a public conscience that the counsel on PR is destined, I believe, to fulfill his highest usefulness to the society in which he lives.”

Such an approach was typical of Bernays. The solution he found to the problem had little to do with public relations in its narrow sense of publicity and media relations and

more to do with public relations in its broadest sense of the relationship between a business and the public. Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, has always regarded PR as a social science, with its ▶