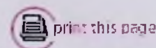
50th anniversary

Burson-Marsteller
50 PROUD YEARS
...just the beginning



Tenth of a 50th Anniversary Series

There's Nothing New Under the Sun: Most Likely, Your "New" Idea is Really Old Hat

By my reckoning, admittedly arbitrary, a generation in the world of public relation nowadays spans about ten years, maybe less. Pre-1990, it was longer — fifteen to twenty years. But with today's people turnover rate at both public relations firms and corporate and not-for profit employers, there is substantial replacement of staff every ten years.

Invariably, each new generation believes it is on the professional cutting edge both strategically and tactically. And why not when the media covering public relations, themselves subject to the same rate of generational change, so freely use such descriptors in their reporting as "new," "the first" and, all too often, "revolutionary." But the fact is, if you've done something unique that works, chances are that it's been done before. So my counsel would be to "go slow" when claiming a "first" -- or that you and your associates have come up with an idea that's really new.

* * * *

Burson-Marsteller took on its first major public affairs assignments in the late 60s. In quick succession, we were working on three highly visible issues covered by the national media, print and electronic. One involved the pesticide DDT, manufactured by our client, Stauffer Chemical. This was one of the very early environmental crises resulting from Rachel Carson's book, "Silent Spring." The trigger was the discovery that the shells of peregrine falcon nesting eggs were becoming thin and fragile, a condition that threatened the species. Scientific investigation indicated that DDT residue on foliage ingested by peregrine falcons was to blame. While our client tried to salvage the product with what were then believed to be appropriate usage restrictions, it became apparent that DDT's future in the United States was doomed. In countries that had no peregrine falcons, many of them impoverished and suffering the ravages of mosquito-borne malaria, a case was made to continue spraying DDT over affected areas. In time, however, DDT was banned worldwide even though it was the most economical and effective weapon against malaria.

Another early environmental assignment was defending phosphates as a detergent ingredient. Phosphates is the substance that enables detergent marketers to claim "whiter than white" washing results. Without phosphates, white shirts would have a grayish look. Conventional wisdom among early environmentalists, however, was that phosphates, an organic material, was nourishing plant life growth in streams and rivers where detergent-containing effluent was disposed of. This process is known as "eutrophication" and it was reducing the marine population because the surplus plant life consumed oxygen that had previously nurtured the fish. Lake Erie was frequently cited as an example. We argued on behalf of our client, FMC Corporation, the nation's largest supplier of phosphates, that phosphates were not the real culprit. A team in our Washington office defined the problem as a failure to treat sewage properly before its discharge into the nation's streams and lakes. We brought the issue to the attention of the League of Women Voters, and sewage treatment became an LWV priority. Reflecting consumer preference for "whiter than white" shirts and bed linen, efforts to ban phosphates at national and state levels were repelled and phosphates continued to be a detergent ingredient. The problem was resolved by constructing more efficient sewage disposal facilities that neutralized phosphates and other nutrients in the effluent.

A third early Burson-Marsteller public affairs assignment involved disposal of taconite tailings into Lake Superior in the late 1960s. It was our first application of what we now term "litigation

support" (three or four decades earlier, the fabled publicist Ivy Lee performed a similar task for the Rockefeller family). Taconite, a natural ore found in Minnesota, is used to make steel. After the ore is taken from the ground, it is processed into small pebbles that are fed into steel furnaces. Left over from the pebble-forming process is an inert residue known as taconite "tailings." These tailings were disposed of by "dumping" them into Lake Superior. Reserve Mining Company, whose major owner was our client Armco Steel, was attacked by environmentalists and later sued by the Federal Government for polluting Lake Superior, a case that required years of litigation. Reserve Mining contended that taconite tailings dumped into the lake were totally inert, and the company produced scientific evidence that neither water quality nor marine life suffered any ill effects. The exacerbating problem was that about twenty square miles of the lake, the portion near shore where the taconite tailings were dumped, looked darker than the surrounding lake from the air (it did not reflect the sunlight in the way the natural bottom did). But we could not convince the media and the outdoors-oriented Minnesota citizenry that Lake Superior retained its pristine qualities despite the discoloration caused by agate-like tailings barely an inch thick on the lake floor. This was one of the first real-life situations that dramatically illustrated the economic tradeoff brought about by the resolution of an environmental dispute. Unless tailings could be inexpensively dumped in the lake, taconite was not economical. It was cheaper to import iron ore from Venezuela than to dispose of the tailings on land. When the Federal court banned lake disposal, the taconite processing plant was closed leaving 3000 employees without jobs in an area devoid of other economic opportunity.

* * * *

For many years Burson-Marsteller has had an outsized reputation for helping clients cope successfully with crisis situations. Many associate our crisis handling reputation to our work with Johnson & Johnson during the two Tylenol crises, the first in 1982 and the second in 1985. Certainly those highly visible engagements served to make Burson-Marsteller and crisis management near synonymous. But the fact is our first recognition for crisis management came a full decade earlier when we created for Owens-Corning Fiberglas (OC) a crisis simulation exercise known as "Bad Day at Black Rock." We got the assignment in 1972 after CEO Bill Boeschenstein tasked Jim Murphy, then OC's top public relations officer, with staging a community relations seminar for plant managers and their senior reports, a total audience of about sixty. Jim (now chief marketing officer at Accenture) called on B-M's Jim Dowling who, working closely with Murphy, came up with an initiative called "Bad Day at Black Rock." CEO Boeschenstein's purpose in calling for a community relations meeting reflected his sensitivity to newly enacted legislation that mandated pollution abatement, non-discrimination in hiring and a host of other issues, including safety, that seriously impacted future business behavior.

Black Rock was a mythical community of 41,000 residents not unlike the small towns where actual Owens-Corning manufacturing facilities were located. Once predominantly rural, Black Rock had been so successful attracting industry that many of its citizens were moving to "exclusive planned communities" in a newly created suburban ring, complaining of "over-industrialization and bad zoning." Although the town "aristocracy" was still very much in charge, a new mayor had been elected on a reform platform and newly-formed special interest groups were becoming very vocal. Among them were recently organized chapters of the Sierra Club and NOW (National Organization for Women).

The problem-at-hand for purposes of the seminar was that Owens-Corning was about to undertake a significant facilities expansion at a time the company was perceived to have repeatedly acted in bad faith. While the expansion would add 200 new jobs, it required additional fuel oil storage tanks on a once historic site that was rezoned for industrial usage after OC purchased it. Also at issue was a variance to allow Owens-Corning to increase total on-site supplies of propane to levels exceeding building code limitations.

Owens-Corning managers were furnished a set of facts and formed teams to present their case to a town zoning board role-acted by Burson-Marsteller people. In a fast-developing scenario, a citizen lawsuit was filed charging Owens-Corning with withholding information on the true contents of the tanks. The local PTA protested the increased truck traffic as a hazard to young children, and talk of fiber glass health hazards began to circulate in the community. To complicate matters even more for OC, local radio stations were reporting that an atmospheric inversion kept smoke emissions and a

noxious odor from dispersing. Other issues confronting OC managers included a sudden death at the plant, a meeting with Sierra Club representatives on environmental matters, a sex discrimination case brought by a female employee and a visit by a NOW delegation, at the time considered one of the most aggressive NGOs — all issues covered by the new legislation that affected all Owens-Corning plant managers and support staff.

Response to the seminar was so positive that CEO Bill Boeschenstein ordered it repeated the next year. Manager attendees were uniformly in agreement that the format and content of the day-long program had increased their sensitivity to the new legislative and cultural environment. They also felt better equipped to analyze and deal with the issues in a rational manner. What would have been a dreary day-long presentation by a series of talking heads on such subjects as relating to community law enforcement authorities and how to support local public schools, an important segment of Owens-Corning's management structure had an opportunity to contribute and participate in an intense total immersion exercise. Jim Murphy's intuition that "I wanted to do something different — something that would be memorable" paid off — "community relations" at the plant level had a new meaning at Owens-Corning.

For Burson-Marsteller, Black Rock had a near-magical effect on both the 30-plus staffers who worked on the project and several hundred of their colleagues who later saw a condensed film version of the event. Black Rock was one of the first of many B-M-created "multi media" presentations utilizing from twenty-four to forty-eight Carousel slide projectors and two to four motion picture projectors requiring a thousand or more 35-mm slides and extensive film footage. Black Rock won a PRSA Silver Anvil for Owens-Corning and Burson-Marsteller.

****

Shortly after the "Bad Day at Black Rock" seminar, we were hired by Gulf Oil, then a major U.S. gasoline brand headquartered in Pittsburgh. CEO Bob Dorsey anticipated the kind of problems the petroleum industry would face with the growth of the environmental movement and the passage of new environmental and other social legislation. Dorsey wanted Gulf management — not only senior managers but also middle management wherever Gulf had installations — to be both forewarned and prepared.

My associates Buck Buchwald and Bill Noonan (who later headed B-M/New York and B-M/Europe) constructed a twelve-hour day-long session that evolved around a mythical town called Crisisport, a city of 650,000 people where Gulf was a major employer and the second largest taxpayer. In written materials provided to attendees (over the course of a year some 2000 at multiple locations in the U.S., Latin America and Europe), Crisisport was described in meticulous detail: its governmental structure; political and social forces in the community; ethnic and religious composition; a description of Gulf facilities that included a refinery and petrochemical plant; a credit card processing center; operating oil wells nearby, a pipeline, marine terminal and other support structures.

About 200 middle and senior managers attended each session after receiving a letter from CEO Dorsey transferring for one day to a new Gulf facility at Crisisport. "During our day-long seminar you'll be asked to handle the full-range of public relations problems that a Gulf manager might be expected to encounter," his letter stated.

The program was in five parts.

The first was press relations and dealt with issues that might arise at any Gulf facility. Borrowing techniques used in the Owens-Corning Black Rock initiative, each attendee, a member of one of five working teams, received a mock newspaper front page whose lead article carried one of five headlines:

Gulf to Lay Off Number of Employees;
Additional Reductions Forecast

Gulf Opposes Transportation Referendum

Proposed Offshore Well Will Fry Our Fish, Critics Say

Ex-Gulf Employee Spills the Oil Beans

O.C.A.W. Launches Plan to Unionize Gulf Operations Here

Their assignment was to develop a plan to react to these articles, not only a communications response but a policy determination affecting the issue reported on in the mock news article.

This was followed by dramatically staged role-played sketches in four issue areas that were top of mind at that time: consumerism (reflecting consumer rights legislation recently passed by Congress); civil rights (newly-enacted legislation forbidding employment discrimination based on race, religion, gender, age and, later, marital status and sexual preference); pollution (Clean Air and Clean Water legislation had recently been enacted and the petroleum industry was perceived to be one the worst offenders). Teams were told they had "one week to prepare for a new pollution referendum" that would be discussed at a town council meeting. The challenge to team members was "what do you do?"

Another exercise in the scripted 140-page scenario was a catastrophic emergency that Gulf managers first learned about from this radio special bulletin while driving to work:

We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin from the WAWA newsroom:

An explosion at Gulf Oil's Crisisport refinery shook the city just moments ago and has left the giant Gulf complex in flames. Casualties are expected to be high with hundreds of workers on the grounds. .... Communities 30 miles from the site are reporting broken windows.... There could be scores dead and many more injured.... There are hundreds of fuel storage tanks scattered across the Gulf complex and the fire is still raging out of control...

The final segment covered preparation for a TV interview which, before the advent of 24-hour business news channels, was still something of a novelty for business executives.

A letter from one participant, a mid-level manager in Gulf's Governmental Relations Department wrote what Crisisport meant to him:

Congratulations on Crisisport! It was the most well-prepared, well-documented, and best executed program I have ever attended...

....Crisisport made me more fully aware of the problems we in Gulf are facing today and gave me a lot of food for thought.

This program resulted in several versions for other oil companies including Amoco and Chevron and helped establish Burson-Marsteller's expertise in crisis preparedness and crisis management.

****

The Tylenol crisis is the one that Burson-Marsteller is most often associated with. Actually there were two Tylenol crises, the first in 1982 and the second in 1985. Whenever the subject arises — in media interviews and in Q&A sessions at schools of communications and other public relations groups — I quickly make the point that the real Tylenol hero was Jim Burke, Johnson & Johnson's CEO who took charge from Day One of both crises and stayed the course twenty-four hours a day – as did Larry Foster, J&J's highly capable and keenly astute public relations chief. Burson-Marsteller played a role, but as a member of a superb team that met daily around a large rectangular table in a conference room adjacent to Burke's office in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

The first crisis arose when seven people in a Chicago suburb died after taking Tylenol capsules. It

was soon discovered that the capsules had come from Tylenol packages which had been removed from supermarket shelves and tampered with. Deadly cyanide was skillfully injected into individual capsules and the packages were returned to their original shelf space in pristine condition. Soon after the deaths were linked to Tylenol, news reports pointed to Tylenol's manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania as a possible source of the cyanide even though cyanide is not used in the manufacturing process. However, a small amount of the deadly chemical was present in a laboratory remote from the production line. This rumor was put to rest when J&J overrode a long-standing ban on cameras in their production facilities and allowed Dan Rather's CBC news crew to show how Tylenol is produced and packaged.

Although the name Johnson & Johnson does not appear on a Tylenol package, Jim Burke quickly concluded the world would soon know that McNeill Laboratories, Tylenol's manufacturer, was a wholly-owned J&J subsidiary. He wisely concluded that the good name of Johnson & Johnson was at stake and immediately assumed the role of both crisis manager and corporate spokesman. We began working with Jim Burke and Larry Foster after Ed Ney, then CEO of our parent company Young & Rubicam and Burke's close friend, suggested that Burson-Marsteller could help. Jim Dowling responded quickly. (I was in Paris at the time and returned several days later).

The key to the successful resolution of the issue was that CEO Jim Burke personally led the decision-making process. He grabbed the initiative by reaching out to the media, especially the evening TV network news programs that were then primary news sources for two-thirds of the American people. Burke projected a high degree of credibility and sensitivity on television, a major plus for Tylenol. Very probably, Burke's most effective attribute was his consistency in delivering the Tylenol message of responsibility to the customer and responsibility to the community, both heavily stressed in the Johnson & Johnson credo.

After it was established that a third-party had poisoned the capsules, J&J and Tylenol were regarded as victims of an evil act that threatened the safety of the nation's food and medicine supply — in fact, any product stacked unattended on supermarket shelves. Perhaps our boldest act was encouraging Burke to seek an interview with Mike Wallace on "60 Minutes." It was, I suspect, one of the rare instances when the CEO of a major corporation actively sought an appearance on "60 Minutes."

Even though the Food & Drug Administration never called for a recall of Tylenol from all retail outlets, Burke decided to do so. It was an expensive decision — some estimates ran as high as $150 million — but it reassured customers of J&J's commitment to their well-being. For three months, Tylenol customers were forced to buy competing analgesics. When time came to reintroduce Tylenol in new tamper-resistant packaging, working closely with Larry Foster and J&J's internal public relations staff, we suggested that massive television, radio and local newspaper coverage was necessary to rekindle customer preference for Tylenol. Our reasoning was "most people learned about Tylenol's problems from hearing or reading the news and that's where they should get their information about the new repackaged Tylenol in a tamper-resistant carton." Our media experts believed that making Tylenol a local story in major markets would put the story on the front pages of local newspapers and make it the lead item on local TV news programs. What we believe to be the first nationwide satellite press conference accomplished this objective. At the time, this was a "gee whiz" undertaking that rated a separate "sidebar" as a new way to hold a press conference and practically guaranteed coverage by local TV and newspaper reporters. Originating in New York, where national media turned out in droves, the press conference was beamed to thirty cities across the United States. As our media mavens predicted, the story led the evening TV news shows and made the front page, with photos, in most markets. The new-fangled technology that beamed a Waldorf-Astoria press conference to local downlinks was a major part of the story!

Unfortunately, there was a second act for Tylenol after three people died from swallowing poisoned Tylenol capsules purchased at a Bronxville, New York, supermarket. Again, Jim Burke took charge and used the Johnson & Johnson Credo as his guidebook. For the better part of two weeks, I was one of those around his conference room table. As with the first Tylenol crisis, Burke was a resolute leader — keen in his analysis, quick to make a decision — and invariably right. He occupies a special place in my pantheon of top CEOs I have worked with over the past half century.

* * * *

After Tylenol, CEOs and public relations professionals alike linked Burson-Marsteller with crisis management. For a decade or more, our crisis business was fueled by telephone calls from executives in distress, as many as two or three in a single week. In dealing with most crises, our objective is usually to contain the crisis locally or regionally or, better still, to resolve the problem before it reaches the media. With more frequency than ever publicly acknowledged, heavily reported instances of commercial terrorism often inspire copy-cats. Shortly after the second Tylenol tampering in 1985, the CEO of a major canned goods marketer telephoned to set up an immediate meeting to discuss a blackmail threat. He told Jim Dowling and me that his company had received in the mail three cans of its principal product with a note saying the cans had been penetrated with cyanide. Company engineers were hard pressed to locate the point of penetration, but on opening and testing one of the cans, they were able to verify the presence of the deadly poison. The author(s) of the note threatened to put cyanide-laced cans on store shelves in twenty markets unless the company followed instructions for delivering a large sum of money in small bills to a location yet to be designated. The company was in a crisis mode for a month when the perpetrators, very likely suspecting a trap, failed to pick up a large garbage bag stuffed with some currency and mostly waste paper at a designated remote mountain site. Although several Burson-Marsteller staffers stood watch around the clock until the issue was resolved, not a word appeared in the news. This was not a one-of-a-kind occurrence.

* * * *

The day (December 3, 1984) The New York Times ran a front page story reporting on a devastating lethal explosion at a Union Carbide chemical facility in Bhopal, a hard-to-reach city in central India, we got a call from a senior Union Carbide executive at corporate headquarters in Danbury, Connecticut, asking for our help in disseminating information to the media and other affected audiences. Some 3800 people died, 40 suffered permanent total disability and 2680 permanent partial disability from the explosion and from inhaling noxious chemicals. A principal challenge for Union Carbide, which owned a 50.9 percent interest in the Indian business, was facilitating news coverage from the remote state of Madhya Pradesh before the widespread use of satellite communications. A team of B-M communicators flew immediately to Bhopal, John Birch, a Brit in B-M/New York, among them. John, as an officer in the British Army, had been stationed in India before joining B-M/ London and subsequently heading B-M offices in Melbourne and Kuala Lumpur. He and other B-Mers remained in India for several weeks to gather information, feed it to corporate headquarters and cooperate with journalists who had traveled to Bhopal.

At the outset media representatives were informed that Union Carbide was committed to disclosing what it knew about the explosion and the loss of life, and that a daily press briefing by a Union Carbide spokesperson would be held. A mechanism was set up for the Bhopal team to transmit information from the disaster site to a war room at Union Carbide corporate headquarters. For about a month journalists and TV crews from around the world attended Union Carbide's briefing at its Danbury complex. From the outset, a single spokesperson was responsible for all communications with the media. Although this resulted in little sleep for the spokesperson, it assured the delivery of consistent messages to the media.

After consultation with Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State, and despite the hostile environment in India, we supported CEO Warren Anderson in his intention to demonstrate his personal concern and the concern of his company by visiting the site in India soon after the explosion. On his arrival in Bhopal, Anderson was detained by state government authorities and kept, unharmed, under house arrest for several days. An upcoming state election was a likely factor in his arrest. But his visit gained him and Union Carbide considerable good will from media around the world. The fact that he was detained — a possibility that was considered but believed to be unlikely after an Indian government assurance of safe conduct – proved to be a plus from a public relations standpoint.

From time to time, Burson-Marsteller has been criticized for working for Union Carbide on the Bhopal disaster — seemingly (and illogically) linking us to the explosion and the huge loss of life. My response to this criticism has been that, by facilitating global press coverage, we assisted our client in performing a valuable public service and living up to its social responsibility.

****

Pan Am Airways reached out to Burson-Marsteller when its Flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, a small village in Scotland, on the night of December 21, 1988, in history's most vicious terrorist aerial attack. Bound from Frankfurt via London to New York and Detroit, 259 passengers, including a number of Syracuse University students returning from year-end European holidays, lost their lives. An additional eleven Lockerbie residents were killed by falling debris. A team of B-M crisis and media professionals headed by Ray O'Rourke played a role in the massive communications task on both sides of the Atlantic. Recognizing the public perception that American commercial air lines — particularly Pan Am, the pioneer and largest trans-Atlantic carrier — were the likely targets of future terrorist attacks, our efforts centered on persuading travelers to and from overseas destinations that Pan Am, led by CEO Thomas Plaskett, was taking an aggressive proactive role in employing maximum security measures to protect passengers. But Lockerbie proved to be the beginning of the end for Pan Am — less than three years later, it was out of business, bankrupt.

****

Burson-Marsteller was a late arrival in the jumbo-sized legal battle between Goliath-like Texaco and David-like Pennzoil. They were engaged in a lawsuit that led to history's largest jury award, largest bankruptcy filing and largest cash settlement. We were hired in 1984 by CEO Hugh Liedtke who had the foresight to recognize that winning in the media could be as important as winning in the courtroom. The fact was that tiny Pennzoil's early judicial wins were being thrashed and discredited by giant Texaco's effective media relations campaign. Our mission was to level the public opinion playing field.

When the litigation ran its course and a Federal district court jury awarded $10.5 billion to Pennzoil, the noted Harvard Law professor, Lawrence Tribe, attributed "substantial credit" for the victory to the favorable media treatment generated by Burson-Marsteller after joining the Pennzoil team. Our principal strategic contribution to the media coverage turnaround was persuading Pennzoil management to be aggressively proactive in communicating with the media and financial analysts. They had the better story all along; they simply weren't telling it.

****

Another major undertaking for Burson-Marsteller on the litigation front was helping Dow Corning defend itself in one of the largest class action suits ever undertaken. The suit was brought in 1992 on behalf of tens of thousands of women who had had breast implants over the past three decades. Our assignment embodied a classic example of coordinating a legal strategy with a public relations strategy. Unfortunately, Dow Corning managers and researchers in years past had generated numerous documents, many later taken out of context, that swayed the jury toward an adverse decision that was upheld on appeal. The three billion dollar damage assessment led to the bankruptcy of Dow Corning (the company has since been reorganized and is once again a profitable business). Ironically, several reputable studies by leading medical organizations have shown that breast implants were not responsible for the immune system disorders claimed by the plaintiffs, and there is now a move afoot to regain FDA approval for the breast implant procedure.

Following the appeals court decision on breast implants, Burson-Marsteller was hired to work under the direction of a Federal judge to notify claimants in more than 75 countries that they were entitled to a share of the proceeds from the suit. This was not our first such assignment. A few years earlier, we carried out a Federal judge's order to notify claimants of their entitlement from a class action award to women who had used the Dalkon shield, a contraceptive device manufactured by the Robins Company. This, too, involved programs in many countries around the world. At the time, Burson-Marsteller was almost unique in possessing the global resources to implement a program of this kind. A third such assignment, in the mid 90s, involved polyvinyl chloride (PCV) plumbing tubing.

****

Two (late 60s/early 70s) assignments I have remembered through the years:

Texaco hired B-M/Brussels to plan and implement the May dedication/opening of a new petroleum refinery in Antwerp. This facility represented a huge financial commitment to the new European Common Market, and Texaco management expected major press coverage as well as attendance by some 700 European influentials, among them the King and Queen of Belgium. Many of the guests would be transported from Brussels to Antwerp and return on a chartered train. Our man-in-charge was Richard Newcomer, who had transferred to Brussels from B-M/Pittsburgh.

Newcomer was advised by his more experienced B-M/Brussels colleagues not to put too much reliance on the unpredictable Belgian weather. Accordingly, his plan included two enormous air-conditioned tents where guests would enjoy an elegant sit-down lunch. All went well until Texaco's CEO made a personal "final inspection" of the venue two days before the event. When he saw the pitched khaki-colored canvas tent tops in the foreground of his gleaming new refinery, he stared at his local PR director and our Dick Newcomer and bellowed "That won't do – those bare ugly tent tops." Whereupon Newcomer retorted, "But, Sir, those tent tops are going to be covered with thousands and thousands of flowers, but I thought it would be too extravagant to order fresh flowers for your inspection visit –I can assure you they'll be there for the dedication ceremony."

When our client contact received a bill for our services and out-of-pocket expenses, he happily approved an unbudgeted $25,000 for thousands of fresh flowers that covered the ugly canvas tent tops.

The other (one in which I was personally involved) was once rather widely known among B-M and client insiders as the "itchy fanny" case history:

For some three decades before and after World War II fiber glass was a popular drapery material. Fiber glass drapes came in a variety of colors and patterns, they hung well, they were durable and they were machine washable. Pre-WWII homemakers were schooled in their care — they knew they should never put fiber glass draperies in a washing machine with wearing apparel. For unknown reasons, this handy household hint did not find its way to their post-WWII counterparts.

This lack of knowledge manifest itself in what the media of the early 70s characterized as "an epidemic of rashes" on female posteriors, at first a mystery illness but soon connected with fiber glass. Young homemakers were putting their fiber glass drapes and their undergarments in the same load of wash, and tiny, almost invisible, slivers of fiber glass attached themselves to the underwear, and from the underwear to the wearer's rear end. For a couple of months, the media had a lot of fun with the issue, especially the cartoonists, i.e. "what mother failed to tell her daughter". Both local and national columnists couldn't resist writing (and offering advice) about what one commentator described as a "medical phenomenon." Even a few newspapers carried editorials, one on the wisdom passed (or not passed) from one generation to another.

The solution seemed easy — simply put a warning label on the draperies instructing homemakers to wash them separately from wearing apparel. But that presented a problem: our client Owens-Corning did not make the draperies. In fact they were two steps removed. They made the glass fibers that were woven by a manufacturer who supplied the fabric from which the draperies were made by still another manufacturer. Ultimately, however, warning labels began appearing on fiber glass drapes, but they were somewhat of an after thought. "Itchy fannies" by then were so much in the news that just about every homemaker could tell you that fiber glass drapes and underwear should never be in the same load of wash.

####

Copyright © by Harold Burson
All rights reserved

December 2003