



Photo by Gideon Lewin

HOWARD RUBENSTEIN

best face forward

by Aliza Davidovitz

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of high tech, it was a time of terrorism; it was the period of prosperity, it was the epoch of corporate crime; it was the season of fame and acclaim, it was the era of shame and blame; it was the spring of Hollywood love stories, it was the winter of dastardly divorces. There is a time for all seasons. Yet, behold, it was the worst of times that washed away fair-weather friends and sycophants, parasites and partisans, and left but one man standing when the mists of misfortune cleared: Howard J. Rubenstein.

He has been called the man for all seasons as his devotion doesn't ebb when the tides turn on people's good fortune. His steadfastness, however, has nothing to do with the fact that he's a public relations legend. What has truly rendered Rubenstein into the PR oak that he is today are his well-planted and ethically nurtured roots. Guided by the words his father spoke to him over 50 years ago, Rubenstein's ethics remain unwavering. "Never forget the human element," his father advised. It is because Rubenstein knows that "hope is where the heart is," that he recognizes human frailty. He says that people are simply humans, humans make mistakes, and mistakes don't necessarily define what people or corporations really stand for. He chooses to see the good in his clients and helps that good shine through for everyone else to see. "I always look at people's achievements so that I can help them through their difficulties," Rubenstein says. In fact, if he doesn't see the good, he won't take the client. Thus, if a case does have the Rubenstein stamp, one can be assured it's "Grade 'A' Beef" and not bull!

“I must have had some impact on the profession. A lot of people pattern their business and careers on things that I have done and I’m very flattered by it.”

His PR empire, however, is not simply preoccupied with saving face or putting his clients’ best face forward. Rubenstein says that it is also about making connections and being aware of the political landscape. With his dynamic staff of about 170 people, his firm, now celebrating its 50th year, represents over 450 clients, which includes blue chip financial institutions, non-profit organizations, law firms, academic institutions, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., the New York Yankees, the Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, BMW, David Letterman, UJA-Federation, healthcare providers, the State of Israel and many of the world’s most famous faces, to list but a few. His Rolodex is an alphabetical “smorgasbord” enough to give any competitor acid reflux. The wealth of its numbers adds up to unparalleled public relations success. For many, such a Rolodex would simply be a glorified directory, but with his unique talent Rubenstein was able to animate those contact numbers into a complexly weaved multimillion dollar business.

After 50 years in the business, most people have got Rubenstein’s “number” as well. He’s regarded by clients, the media, as well as by his adversaries, as a mensch. That is why a half-century later he is worthy of honorable “menschion.” The record speaks for itself. The PR guru, who has a law degree from St. John’s University, has never sued anyone and has never been sued. When he first started out in the industry, most PR men were considered less than professional. But with his high standards and integrity, Rubenstein redefined the profession and revealed the meritorious and philanthropic face of public relations.

“I must have had some impact on the profession,” he acknowledges modestly. “A lot of people pattern their business and careers on things that I have done and I’m very flattered by it.” Incidentally, The Public Relations Society of America has recently asked Rubenstein to be their honorary chairperson and help structure their upcoming mega-conference, which will host 2500 attendees. Rubenstein has already booked Donald Trump, Larry King and Al Roker for the event. In 2002, Rubenstein was listed among the top ten in *Crain’s* list of “The 100 Most Influential Leaders in Business.” Other headlines have titled him the “The Dean of Damage Control,” “The Man to Know” and “Master Handler.”



Indeed, even as a young man, Rubenstein knew how to handle himself. He reflects on the time when he was still a young teen and a group of Italian kids who lived in his Bensonhurst neighborhood picked a fight with him. “They were pretty belligerent,” Rubenstein recalls. Little did they know that this straight-A Jewish student lifted weights and was also quite the boxer. The threatening moment didn’t call for PR. Rubenstein slugged them right back and put up a tough fight. In doing so he earned both their respect and long-term friendship. “I took on the toughest guy,” Rubenstein tells. “And I did pretty good.” Perhaps it was the first sign of a steely character that would not back down when a tough challenge would come his way.

As a young man, Rubenstein would also spend much of his time doodling, sketching and painting portraits. While still in high school he

entered an art contest and submitted an illustration he produced based on Lord Byron’s sonnet “The Prisoner of Chillon.” He won, and was offered a four-year Macy’s Scholarship if he would study art at college. But Rubenstein chose to design another course for his life and instead attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied economics. Yet, to this day, he continues to personally design birthday cards for his staff members. He currently lives across the street from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and both he and his wife visit museums regularly. Rubenstein says he wishes he had more time for his art work, but for the moment, this man on the move has no time for still life.

But as a student, when Rubenstein was studying economics and plotting graphs, he did make time for uncharted fun. One day, he and some of his Jewish friends from the fraternity house decided to take a trip to Atlantic City. It was not long after they had stopped off at a drugstore to look at some magazines when a group of tough-looking, leather-clad teens walked into that same store. Rubenstein’s friends were struck with fear, believing their destruction was imminent. Rubenstein slowly turned around. He could not believe his eyes. It was the same gang of guys from the old neighborhood. “They came over to hug me,” Rubenstein remembers with a laugh, “and my friends were so happy not to get beaten up.” The nickname “Rocky” that his Italian friends had given him years earlier had endured. When Rubenstein and his frat buddies went back to U of Penn, the story circulated around campus and no one ever dared mess with this Bensonhurst Jew

who still sported hand-painted ties and wore blue suede shoes.

It wasn't long however before Rubenstein was stepping on his own blue suede shoes. The very smart Rubenstein was accepted into Harvard Law School, where he found out it wasn't for him. After two months, much to the dismay of his parents, Rubenstein decided he wanted to leave. "I looked at 'the quitting' as a motivating factor," Rubenstein says. "I decided then that I had to succeed at something, I just didn't know what." But in the back of his mind, he always knew that he wanted to be just like his father whom he deeply loved and respected.

Rubenstein's father was a crime reporter for the now-defunct *New York Herald Tribune*. Rubenstein was always fascinated by his father's job and would often go along with him to crime scenes, fires, as well as to catered banquets where he'd meet mayors, police commissioners and numerous politicians. His father, who worked in the press "shack" across from the police station, was very well connected and was the only reporter to wear a suit while others wore T-shirts. Perhaps there he learned an important PR lesson: appearances matter. "My father was a very quiet man at home," Rubenstein reflects, "but he was a great reporter and had a tremendous work ethic." So when his father, who sometimes dabbled in PR, suggested a career in it for his son, the young Howard was apt to give it a try.

With his father's help, the fledgling public relations man got his first job from famed attorney Raoul Felder's mother at the Menorah Home and Hospital for the Aged and Infirm. He received \$100 a month for writing speeches and press releases. His next client was a union, the Barber and Beauty Culturists of America, which ini-

tially hired him to edit its newsletters. He was soon enlisted by the union president to write a speech that would address a bill that was before Congress which the barbers found quite objectionable. The witty words he put into the president's mouth won Rubenstein the media's attention. He wrote, "Pitch



Photo by Gideon Lewin

your objections while you're shaving your clients, they'll have to listen." He eventually began to do work for Brooklyn politicians who themselves went on to be major political players. Rubenstein's big break came from a Manhattan real estate developer, Morris Morgenstern, who was looking for publicity. Knowing the real estate magnate had a nice voice, Rubenstein arranged for him to sing at a Jewish orphanage during the Jewish holidays. It attracted the much desired attention. Rubenstein later arranged for that same real estate developer to personally present a \$5,000 check to Harry Truman for the Truman Library, and that hit the press as well. He learned quickly what makes headlines. It is for this reason that the first sentence in

the Rubenstein Associates' manifesto reads, "Understanding the news process and what makes a story is the cornerstone of our public relations practice."

One of his stunts in later years included hanging a giant inflatable King Kong on the Empire State Building to attract tourism to the observatory. When the giant gorilla started to deflate, Rubenstein quickly shifted gears, employing his considerable crisis communications skills labeling the effort to reinflate the beast a "rescue." The media ate it up.

Today, receptionists proudly answer the phone "Rubenstein Associates." Few are familiar with the days when his enterprise comprised his mother's kitchen table and his begging her to answer the phone "Rubenstein Associates." She'd never do it, saying, "It's my home." When the tables began to turn, Rubenstein set up shop in the same newspaper "shack" where his father worked. When other reporters complained he made too much noise, he was forced to move again. He soon opened his own

small office on Court Street in Brooklyn, and client by client he began climbing the rungs to success. During the same period, his father convinced him to go back to law school so he'd have something to fall back on. He graduated from Saint John's first in his class in the night school division.

Though Rubenstein was rising to the top, in 1958 he decided to make a very risky move: He went out on a blind date. His family doctor had fixed him up with one of his neighbors, a young lady named Amy Forman, who had studied at the Flatbush Yeshiva and was a sophomore at Barnard College. It was love at first sight. Rubenstein says he liked everything about her. "She was very bright, very pretty and not at all self-centered," Rubenstein says of his now-wife

“I always ask my clients, ‘What’s your good name worth to you?’ Once they determine what it’s worth to them, I’ll know what to do to preserve it.”

of 44 years. “She is a very strong and gentle woman.” She is also a successful business woman and is a part of the family that owns Peter Luger Steak Houses in Brooklyn and Long Island.

Although Rubenstein won’t fess up as to who’s the boss in his house, he does say that his wife has been a major support system for him. And though he puts in 80 to 90 hours a week, including most of Sunday, his wife continues to encourage her husband. “We are a perfect match,” Rubenstein says. “We never fight.” The couple runs four miles together every morning in Central Park (perhaps, to his benefit, he is the faster runner). The Rubensteins spend every Saturday together and Howard will very rarely go to business dinners if his wife can’t partake. “I always share what’s going on at work with my wife,” he says. “She will always tell me what she thinks but never forces her opinion.”

By 1962, Brooklyn was hitting rock bottom and Rubenstein knew it was time to take another risk by moving his business to Manhattan. Upon arrival, his business boomed. He started in the Woolworth Building and then settled into the 6th Avenue skyscraper that he’s now occupied for 34 years.

Interestingly, the PR prince admits to *Lifestyles* that as a kid he was very shy and still is, somewhat. “When I started in business it wasn’t easy for me to introduce myself, go around and shake hands,” he tells. “However, maybe that’s an asset if you’re not a braggart.” He goes on to say that when he serves a client he takes himself out of the equation. He listens carefully and does what’s right for them and not what’s right for him. “It seems to work in my business.”

In response to the media that’s in the business of making everything public, and to a public that thinks everything’s its business, “Rocky” Rubenstein puts up the best offense and defense. He fights for his clients with the agility, instincts and speed of a prizefighter. “I always ask my clients, ‘What’s your good name worth to you?’ Once they determine what it’s worth to them, I’ll know what to do to preserve it.”



With all that Rubenstein has seen and heard throughout his life he has enough tantalizing tales to write an award-winning novel. But he has turned down the numerous offers to do so. “I would never compromise the confidentiality of the people I have served by writing a book,” he says. Perhaps I would just write a “how-to” book, “How I Stumbled Into PR and Made It Work.”

And even though Rubenstein hobnobs with the stars, his feet are firmly on the ground. “I’m a very normal guy,” Rubenstein says. “Success has never made me think I’m superior to anyone else.” Refusing to rest on his laurels, he says, “You’ve got to earn it every day.”

He says that he’s learned a lot about human nature in his career and how greed and money often dominate actions. He feels as comfortable with everyday people who are out of the limelight as he does with those that are famous. Some of his favorite guys work for the sanitation union, a union he has represented since 1968. “I simply don’t like arrogant people,” he explains. He even has his own staff keep him in check in case he ever unknowingly crosses the line.

Rubenstein has passed on his work ethic to his own three children: Roni, Richard and Steven. The one life lesson he felt especially important to convey to them is to play it straight and to be as good as you can be. “You have to reach as far as you can to achieve the most you can achieve.” And achieve they have. Both Richard and Steven have already established their own significant profiles within the PR world, each running his own business within the family of Rubenstein companies. They recently handled two of the most spectacular promotional events of the year. Richard did the public relations for the new Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle with the grand opening receiving immense publicity, and Steven managed all of the publicity for the Tribeca Film Festival for the third year in a row, with startling results.

Roni was a prosecutor in the office of New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau and now splits her time between raising her three children and doing part-time work for Rubenstein Associates. Rubenstein says that his children are very ethical and never step over the boundaries despite the fact that public relations is a very tough business.

The proud father tells how his children have brought their own talents to the family of companies and are perpetually bringing in new ideas and keeping things on the cutting edge of fast-moving times.

Though Rubenstein has much to smile about, he will never forget that shattering morning almost three years ago when he had every reason to cry. The morning of September 11, 2001, he had been invited to a breakfast meeting at the World Trade Center to

“I feel very privileged to be protected by our Constitution, supported by our government and given the opportunity to do what I do. I feel very grateful that I was able to start from scratch and build all that I have built.”

discuss how building management was protecting the Twin Towers against terrorism. John O’Neil, former FBI head of counterterrorism who had recently been hired to run the security division for the Trade Center and a close friend of Rubenstein’s, led the meeting. At the last minute, Rubenstein decided to attend a regular 8 A.M. staff meeting and asked O’Neil if one of his colleagues could attend in his place. O’Neil suggested the colleague come for a later session, around 10 A.M. As Rubenstein’s staff meeting was winding up, a secretary ran into the conference room to tell them the first tower had been hit. Rubenstein and his staff members were safe. John O’Neil died that day. Rubenstein left his office, went home, closed the phone lines, got into bed and cried.

Indeed, Rubenstein has come very far, but he has not forgotten where he came from. He says that he often drives back to Brooklyn to reflect on days gone by. On one occasion he passed by the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, a place where he spent hours playing basketball as a child and also where he had his bar mitzvah. He was heartbroken that the building and facilities were in shambles. Once again, hope was where the heart is, and Rubenstein, along with UJA-Federation of New York, Marty Payson and Stuart Subotnick, helped raise millions of dollars to restore the edifice beyond its former glory. Excited by that success, Rubenstein and his colleagues part-

nered again with UJA-Federation to do the same for additional synagogues in the Bronx.

Despite his success, Rubenstein has not outgrown his Jewish identity.



Photo by Gideon Lewin

Every Friday night he and his family make the Sabbath blessing over the candles, wine and challah bread. His home is strictly kosher and all his grandchildren attend Jewish schools. His wife, Amy, is fluent in Hebrew and has been studying Yiddish for 8 years. “My wife wouldn’t marry me unless I promised her that all our kids would study in a yeshiva,” Rubenstein confesses. He kept that promise!

“Being Jewish means leading a life that is charitable, honorable and being attentive to the needs of others,” Rubenstein says. “It also means having an obligation to Israel.” And indeed he

is heavily involved in Jewish causes and organizations. He is also one of the founders of The Museum of Jewish Heritage. As for the Promised Land, he admits that it is very difficult to fight

Israel’s PR battle because all the big decisions are made in Israel and his firm usually has to come out on the defensive. But his firm has placed many qualified faces on TV to fight that battle. He finds it incredible that suicide bombers and terrorists are the ones gaining public sympathy instead of their innocent victims.

The Rubenstein family will be traveling to Israel this summer in honor of his grandson’s bar mitzvah. It’s a trip that will certainly be memorable for his grandchildren, but perhaps won’t outshine the time Rubenstein introduced them to Yankee ball players or the time he got them to serve as bat boys for the team.

Rubenstein, who wears the Yankee team ring, is truly a team player himself. He generously gives credit to his highly skilled staff whose strengths, he says, augments his own abilities. He also offers profound thanks to the great city of New York and to the United States of America. “I feel very privileged to be protected by our Constitution, supported by our government and given the opportunity to do what I do,” he says. “I feel very grateful that I was able to start from scratch and build all that I have built.”

And as far as PR goes, he has certainly done a far, far better thing than has ever been done before!

For comments please contact:
AlizaLifestyles@aol.com 