

## How I Did It

# Howard Rubenstein

likes action, being at the center of controversy.

He is a PR man—perhaps *the* PR man—and proud of it

**As told to Adam Hanft** Photograph by Brad Wilson

*His first office may have been at his mother's kitchen table—he relocated when she refused to answer the phone “Rubenstein Associates”—but he has certainly moved beyond. Way beyond. Today, Howard Rubenstein might very well be the nation's premier mediameister, the archetype of the lavishly connected public relations honcho. His clients are an honor role of the rich, the famous, and the flawed.*

*Rubenstein's story is one of an intuitive understanding of the strands of power, and a canny, single-minded focus on building a business that leveraged his own reputation and access, but never at the expense of his clients. Famous as he has become, he knows who pays the bills.*

**I went to school in Brooklyn,** then to the University of Pennsylvania, and then to Harvard Law School, which, to the consternation of my parents, I quit after two months. My father, a crime reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*, said, “Well, what do you want to do for a living?” And I said, “Don't ask me.” I was really lost. And he said, “Why don't you do some PR?”

**No one paid attention to PR people** in those days. The companies were tiny and not given respect. The first account I got was the Menorah Home and Hospital for the Aged and Infirm in Brooklyn. I met the head of the home, who said, “We're having a groundbreaking ceremony. Can you write the speeches for it?” I said, “Of course.” I'd never written a speech. I'd heard only one speech in my life, when I graduated.

**Suddenly, I'm a press agent.**

And all of a sudden the stories started to appear in the *Times*, *Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Tribune*, all the papers. And I said, “Boy, this is easy.”

**So there I am at my mother's kitchen table.**

I'm typing away. The phone rings. I say, “Mom, would you please pick up ‘Rubenstein Associates’?” She refused. So I looked around for an office. I remember meeting the building manager at 26 Court Street, a nice guy, white mustache,

*Rubenstein works on the 30th floor of 1345 Avenue of the Americas, supported by an armada of assistants—when asked how many, he said “a lot.” The firm, which has been hiring of late, has 170 employees.*



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white hair. He showed me two rooms and an outer room, but the lights were out. I said, "How come the lights are out?" And he says, "They went bankrupt and we can't turn the lights on yet." So I said, "Can you turn them on in one room?" He said, "Sure, one room."

**I built a clientele of maybe 30, 35 clients,** and I was earning a lot of money for a kid. But then I looked around and saw that the borough was disintegrating, and I thought, "If I don't get out of Brooklyn in five years, I'm out of business." I moved across the bridge to the Woolworth Building. Eighth floor. Good view.

**That was in the early '60s.** I was really frightened because I'd left my home base. I had no Manhattan clients. But my friend, the white-haired guy from Court Street, took me to see a philanthropist and real estate man named Morris Morgenstern. I walked into a gigantic office at 119 West 57th Street. I had never been in a real office. And here's this lovely little man. He's five foot two, sitting at the desk turning the pages of Jewish newspapers. And he says: "I love publicity." I said, "I can get it for you."

**I pulled my first stunt with him.** I said, "I know a little orphanage in Brooklyn that I'm doing some work for. And the kids would love at the Jewish holidays to hear someone sing. I know you like to sing." He said, "I was an orphan!" He probably wasn't. So I brought a choir to the orphanage, and he sang for them, orphan to orphan. I gave it to the *World Telegram*, page one. Page one! "Millionaire Orphan Sings." And that started a series of stunts.

**Then a few dramatic things happened.** I met a man named Lew Rudin, and a bunch of us, mainly real estate people like Lew, formed something which eventually became the Association for a Better New York. This group helped us pull through the New York City financial crisis of the '70s. That was a big turning point for me because from that point on, the real estate industry started to hire us. To this day, we probably have the largest real estate PR firm in the country.

**Getting introduced to Rupert Murdoch** was the next important thing in my career. We've become very, very

good friends. He's probably the person I admire the most in my 50 years in business. The only time I ever got an emotional reaction from him in a business context is when he had to sell the *New York Post*. He shed a tear.

**Another big break** for me was when George Steinbrenner hired me to represent him and the Yankees. That's been terrific too. In many, many instances, George will follow my advice. Sometimes he doesn't. But it doesn't affect my ego.

**Gradually, different practice areas opened up**—the real estate grouping, the political grouping, hospitals and universities, dozens of corporations. I found I didn't want to pigeonhole myself. So, I found people who could specialize. We built a wonderful business.

**My first ground rule is always to tell the truth.** A client will call and say, "This terrible thing happened to me. What should I say?" I say, "Wait a minute. First ask: What was the right thing to do? Then do it." Some of the people involved in the current corporate scandals thought they could talk their way out of a corner. They should have instead consulted their lawyer, talked to a PR person who would only deal in accurate statements, or say nothing at all.

**I think that in 10 or 15 years PR will command** more respect. You'll find a far greater sense of ethics. When I was first around, they wouldn't let the PR person into the room until they made the decision. In 10 years the PR person will be an integral part of the decision-making process and on the executive committees of most major corporations. You see it today—wars are being run on PR, governments, businesses, hey, almost everything.

**I'm proud to call myself a PR person.** I came from Brooklyn. I know what's factual. That's why I say I won't spin my own story. I am what I am.

**I have a bunch of famous clients** and none has ever second-guessed me. Because if you're right most of the time—and PR is such an inexact art, you can't be right all of the time.... But if you're not right most of the time, goodbye.

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