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## Integrity, Not Image Fixing, Is 'Real' Public Relations

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*Special to the Sun*

To a reporter who's known public relations maestro Howard J. Rubenstein for the better part of four decades, the most obvious question to pose at lunch yesterday was: "Well, are you surprised at your extraordinary success in American business?"

It would have been perfectly understandable had Mr. Rubenstein—as trim and dapper as the reporter could recall from the days that the Bensonhurst-born top graduate of St. John's Law School was thick in civic affairs during the John Lindsay mayoral administration—had simply said "No."

After all, in the 51 years since he launched his own company Mr. Rubenstein has practically re-invented the once disreputable field of public relations, transforming it from gossip-peddling press agency into a thoroughly professional trade where detailed research, market studies and skilled application of law, psychology and sociology are as paramount as building a media Rolodex.

It has all been done on his own steam, drawing on his legal training and analytical skills and on his canny ability to size up situations and read people. It has been done by employing a vast network of carefully cultivated political and corporate contacts. It has been done by deploying a formidable arsenal of resourcefulness, wit, bonhomie, and good cheer. It has been done by strictly adhering to the values that his parents, Sam and Ada, taught him: self reliance and strict adherence to a personal code of ethics. Why wouldn't such a man think that success was preordained?

It would also have been understandable had Mr. Rubenstein, an astonishingly modest man, simply shrugged at the reporter's question and gingerly moved on to another topic. He doesn't ordinarily like to talk about himself, contending that in the high-octane business of New York PR, it's the client whose voice and sensibility that need to come across even if crafted by the spokesperson.

But this is what Mr. Rubenstein said in response to the question: "Yes, I'm surprised. I

### LUNCH AT THE FOUR SEASONS WITH: HOWARD RUBENSTEIN



**RUBENSTEIN** From Bensonhurst to the boardrooms of Manhattan, a 51-year journey of accomplishment.

never thought that I'd ever get to this position. I never aspired to this recognition. Every time someone honors me with an award, I'm amazed. I would never find myself saying, 'I'm a big shot.' Being modest is a much more comfortable position for me."

Being modest wins him friends all through the American Establishment—and beyond into the neighborhoods of everyday New York. It would be no hyperbole to say that more doors are open to Mr. Rubenstein in this city than practically any other public figure. He has a way of making people feel good about themselves.

Being modest and letting his accomplishments speak for themselves also wins him clients—like George Steinbrenner and the New York Yankees; Rupert Murdoch and the News Corporation; American Express; Kraft Foods; Commerce Bank; Tishman Speyer Properties; Columbia University; Silverstein Properties/World Trade Center; the Guggenheim Museum; the Mount

Sinai Medical Center; the Disney Company; the New York Philharmonic; the New York Metropolitan Opera; Bear Stearns; Morgan Stanley's real estate division; City University of New York; Lifetime Television; the Greater New York Chapter of the American Red Cross; the Inner-City Scholarship Fund of the Archdiocese of New York; and UJA Federation of New York.

These clients turn to Mr. Rubenstein because he is—in business parlance—the "man to see." He gets things done for them, whether that means gently suggesting a favorable story in a major publication, or quietly whispering a pleasant word into the ears of an irritable New York mandarin, or smoothing the way for a business deal that brings opposing sides closer amicably, or, as he puts, "just preventing war."

Before he came to yesterday's lunch, for example, Mr. Rubenstein was up in Harlem to find a solution for a community problem involving a major politician.

"There would have been a war of sorts there, but that's not how I approached the issue," he said. "I always look for peaceful solutions. I'm not a fan of brutal attacks where you want the other side to surrender. I get people together, not apart."

He is, in other words, an emollient, and his professional approach is simple.

"I try to put my ego aside," Mr. Rubenstein said. "I listen. I listen very, very carefully to what people who come to me have to say. I look for how they parse their explanations. I ask them to walk me through their problems, where indeed there are problems. I try to bring a calm and steady hand to the table. I give people respect."

Respect doesn't mean obsequiousness toward clients, however powerful.

"The PR person shouldn't be an order taker," Mr. Rubenstein said. "If you want to be an order taker, then there's a decent enough profession for that—you can be a waiter or a waitress."

What getting Mr. Rubenstein and his company—Rubenstein Associates—to represent a client means is that he becomes engaged with a company's strategy and philosophy concerning communications. When clients ask him, as they frequently do, "How do we enhance our image?" Mr. Rubenstein almost always replies, "First of all, are you doing the right thing?"

This is an important article of faith for him.

"With all the reports of corporate excesses, of outsized CEO salaries, business braggadocio, the media's focus on negativity—is it any wonder that we live in an environment of mistrust?" Mr. Rubenstein told The New York Sun. "And the way to deal with the situation is not to parse your way out, or to dissemble. You've got to tell your story straight, to apologize where appropriate, and to run a clean and ethical ship. American society expects no less of its corporations."

He's constantly importuned by business titans who've come under the scrutiny of prosecutors examining corporate malfeasance. Mr. Rubenstein will frequently turn away clients if he isn't satisfied about their integrity.

"If you're out in the public domain, as indeed corporations are, you'd have to be foolish not to be paying attention to public perceptions of corporate behavior and morality," he said.

"Corporate executives ask me, 'How do I prevent bad things from happening to me—like bad publicity, bad headlines?'" Mr. Rubenstein said. "And my answer always is, 'Well, you don't prevent these things by deception. You need to look at the substance of your situation and say, 'How do I make things right?'"

It has been said of Mr. Rubenstein that he can almost always be relied on to get his clients reasonably fair treatment in the media. It has never been said of him that he's cut corners in the service of his clients, or that he's compromised his own integrity. Indeed, he's been known to call up journalists and acknowledge his own mistakes.

It happened not long ago when an important client gave him erroneous information, which Mr. Rubenstein then relayed to a reporter. When he found out that he had been misled, he immediately called up the reporter.

"I misspoke," Mr. Rubenstein told him.

The reporter wrote a story in which he gave details of Mr. Rubenstein's candor.

"You cannot afford to let your reputation be ruined," he said. "I've got to protect my reputation. And I tell my business clients that

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they have got to protect their reputation. It's not only a question of ethics and morality here. It's plain common sense. You know what I tell my clients? I tell them that if you lose your reputation, you lose your ability and position to do business at the level you want to do business in."

This is not to say that—notwithstanding the stream of corporate tycoons paraded by prosecutors in courts these excitable days—Mr. Rubenstein spends all his time advising only clients who land themselves in trouble. He isn't a scold. But by now it's pretty widely understood around New York that when someone asks for Howard Rubenstein's help, truthfulness and transparency are expected in return. (And, one might add, also the ability to pay his invoices on time.)

In the spirit of what he calls New York's special opportunity for public service, Mr. Rubenstein makes time to serve on the boards of organizations like the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust;

the Police Athletic League, and the Einstein College of Medicine. His personal philanthropy is extensive, but discreet. (Disclosure: Mr. Rubenstein's foundation once contributed a modest sum to the pilot issue of a nonprofit magazine edited by this writer.) When it comes to being engaged in the civic and social life of the city, Mr. Rubenstein and his wife Amy are ubiquitous presences.

That isn't because of any overweening desire to be seen at glittering galas. It is because Mr. Rubenstein enjoys the city as only a native New Yorker can. He is awed by its dynamic changes and yet revels in the city's 300-year history and its myriad neighborhoods that reflect the diversity flowing from long years of immigration.

"In my experience, I have found that New Yorkers take great pride in their hometown because it is a place that encourages the free expression of ideas and stimulates intellectual creativity across social, cultural, political and business spectrums," Mr. Rubenstein said. "New Yorkers' resiliency is manifest in the way that we have recovered from the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and have weathered the ensuing volatility of our economy. We find strength in our diversity, our ability to tap the best educational minds and in an environment that encourages the growth and prosperity of businesses across the board."

It was impossible to end the lunch without asking him what, of all his extensive accomplishments, he was proudest of.

The answer came without hesitation.

"My two sons, Richard and Steven," Mr. Rubenstein said. "That they are honorably successful, doing well on their own, even if they received an initial boost from me. They don't have to live in the shadow of a successful father. To me they exemplify how relevant and significant public relations has become; they exemplify what young people can achieve. I like to encourage young people to get into the PR business. It has a real future."

Both sons have PR firms of their own. The continuity of the Rubenstein name in American business is assured. And if the sons are anything like their father, also assured is the brand's integrity.