

Giving Public Relations a Good Name

An Interview with Howard J. Rubenstein,
President, Rubenstein Associates, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Howard Rubenstein founded Rubenstein Associates, Inc. in 1954. Rubenstein provides strategic communications counsel and has advised leaders of multinational corporations, non-profit organizations, and civic entities. Rubenstein sat on the Mayor's Committee on Business and Economic Development for New York City Mayors Abraham Beame, David Dinkins, and Rudy Giuliani. He serves on the executive committee of the Association for a Better New York, which he helped to found, and is a trustee of the Police Athletic League, the Foundation for the National Archives, and the Inner-City Scholarship Fund of the Archdiocese of New York. In addition, he is a Co-Founder and Vice Chairman of the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. Rubenstein holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a doctorate of law from St. John's University School of Law. Early in his career, he served as Assistant Counsel to the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee and has also served as a consultant to the United States Foreign Claims Settlement Commission.



Howard J. Rubenstein

COMPANY BRIEF One of the United States' largest independent public relations agencies, New York-based Rubenstein Associates, Inc., along with Rubenstein Communications, Inc., and Rubenstein Public Relations, Inc., (www.rubenstein.com) represent a roster of more than 450 clients, including global corporations, media and entertainment companies, sports teams, financial services organizations, real estate concerns, educational and cultural institutions, law firms, health care providers, and not-for-profit organizations, as well as business executives and other public figures. Current clients include the New York Yankees, NewsCorp, Pfizer, the Metropolitan Opera, Museum of Modern Art, New York Presbyterian Hospital, Columbia University, and Tishman Speyer.

What is it about Rubenstein Associates that has made it so successful in maintaining long-term client relationships?

We have relationships that go back 40 years or more.

We built our strength and brand by insisting on accuracy, an adherence to integrity, and understanding news, and that all led to the longevity of our reputation and strength.

You are known as someone who understands the value of personal relationships. How do you make sure that remains a part of your company's culture?

I insist on two tracks: one is the technology track and we retain staffers who understand the new technology. That is essential.

But the personal touch, the relationship you have with a client, with media, and with your own staff is absolutely essential to the longevity and strength of your company.

Is it better understood today that in down times public relations and communications need to remain a focus?

In bad times, you have to be more aggressive in a positive way. You can't dig a foxhole, get into it, and hide.

I try to be a leader in dealing with the issues that confront us today and the issues today are far different than they were 10 to 20 years ago. They are more complex because of the communication channels that exist. So it makes what you do more complicated and far more serious.

Your clients are diverse. How do you build the talent internally with the varied expertise you need and how are you structured to ensure you have that expertise?

We've organized into groups. I have a management group that deals with the relationship with clients – the assignment of clients and evaluation of how the client relationships are going.

Each person in our management area usually has three to ten people reporting to him or her on a regular basis and he or she tries to understand the detail of what is happening on each account.

I give my staff the opportunity to rise up. We take young men and women out of college, hire them as assistants, train them, and they start up the ladder in my organization. So there is real opportunity to practice what they've learned, and to be recognized for what they're doing.

I have almost no turnover of senior staff, because they see their future linked inextricably to our growth, strength, and adherence to the basic principles of doing good.

From the beginning, your firm has had a focus on community outreach and pro bono work. How critical is that to the culture of Rubenstein and how important was it to build a company that would be engaged to that degree?

I have always valued pro bono work from the beginning of my career 57 years ago. I found that if we gave of our talent without reservation, it had tremendous resonance and was valuable.

If you do a lot of good pro bono work, you get to know the boards of directors of these institutions and they see your talent and devotion to them. You will then get calls from members of those boards telling you about a business problem or asking for advice outside of what you're doing with the pro bono work. So pro bono work projects your abilities effectively and turns aside the issue of working only if you are paid a lot of money. I found it valuable not to focus on money but on delivery of service, ideas, direction, and showing that public relations has value.

Do you ever look back and appreciate the success the business has had and was it difficult to be less engaged as it has grown?

I never expected it to grow into such a sizable, influential, and key company in the American and New York environment, but it happened a little at a time.

You could not do this in many countries or cities, but with the talent here, you can hire good people and project interesting things, but you have to be ready to relinquish the detailed daily work. You do have to realize you can't do it all. If you tried to do it all, you'd end up as a mediocre company.

What is it about New York City that makes it a place where leaders can really have an impact on the needs of the city?

Even though many of the individuals involved are competitive with each other, they realize that if they coalesce, they can achieve broad goals that will help not only their businesses and industry, but the city as a whole.

The Real Estate Board of New York, the Partnership for New York City, the Association for a Better New York, NYC & Company – I can rattle off a number of organizations, many of which are in other boroughs, that use the same pattern of recognition that in their unity is their strength. ●