

# How to Speak For a President

An Interview with Dana Perino,  
Chief Issues Counselor, Burson-Marsteller



Dana Perino

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dana Perino served as the White House Press Secretary for President George W. Bush from September 2007 to January 2009. Previously, Perino worked in Washington, D.C. for Representative Scott McInnis of Colorado as a staff assistant before serving nearly four years as Press Secretary for Rep. Dan Schaefer. In November 2001, Perino secured a position as a spokesperson for the Department of Justice, at which she served for two years. She was then asked to join the White House staff as the Associate Director of Communications for the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Perino graduated from the University of Southern Colorado (now known as Colorado State University-Pueblo) in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in mass communications and minors in both political science and Spanish. Perino obtained her masters in Public Affairs Reporting at the University of Illinois at Springfield while also working as a daily reporter covering the Illinois Capitol for CBS affiliate, WCIA.

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## What excited you about the opportunity to work with Burson-Marsteller?

Karen Hughes first introduced me to Burson. She thought that the team environment was very good, she liked the high-caliber clients, and she felt that the bipartisan nature of the firm was a good fit for what she wanted to do, and she thought I would think the same. So we went through about a five-month process. They gave me room to run, they answered all my questions, and they encouraged me to look at other opportunities and decide if this was where I really wanted to be. And I have been so warmly welcomed here, both by the staff as well as by the clients, that I think I made the right decision.

## You recently went to Africa to see firsthand some of the work being done because of President Bush's actions as to AIDS in Africa. Will you give an overview of that trip, and how it changed or enlightened your thinking?

My husband and I spent four weeks volunteering at a faith-based organization in South Africa called Living Hope. It opened my eyes to what real poverty in the world looks, feels, and smells like. Part of me thinks that in the future, I could see myself doing some sort of work in Africa full-time.

Also, what I saw there was that Americans care a lot about other people. They work very hard to be good ambassadors of the United States of America. I met so many Americans who are there on their own, and that is real leadership, where you can put aside material wants and go outside of your comfort zone and use your talents and abilities and compassion to help others.

## How challenging was your role as Press Secretary in terms of the speed of media today, and what are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the 24/7 news cycle?

The traditional media is collapsing for a lot of reasons. When I was Press Secretary, there were only two entities in Washington that seemed to have consistently lower approval ratings than President Bush, and that was Congress and the media. I'm not glad about it, because I strongly believe in the need for a free press. It doesn't mean that people are necessarily less informed. In fact, because of all the different ways you can get information now, people are more informed. However, it's now about the quality of that information since it's very hard to find objective information anymore. So I don't know where things go from here, but I do know that we're not going to be able to change it, so we might as well roll with it.

## At times, there is the perception of an adversary relationship between the Press Secretary and the media. Is that warranted, or is there much more of a close working relationship and respect from both sides?

There is a healthy amount of respect and a lot of fun. The reporters knew that if I said I would get back to them, I would. I also understood that their industry is under tremendous pressure, and the vitriolic barbs they get from both sides are really unfortunate and disrespectful. The media is also being asked to do a lot with less. They have to file three or four times a day now, and good solid reporting takes a long time to do. So I would work to try to make their jobs easier by providing them with good, solid information as quickly as possible. I also used to give it to everybody all at once – I didn't play games with who should get what first. I think they also understood how tough my job was.

## What are the keys to success in the Press Secretary role?

One is access to the President and to the senior staff, and mutual trust between the press office and the rest of the administration; two is a willingness to commit a tremendous amount of resources and your own personal time to understand the issues, and that means putting your social life on the back burner; and three is having really good people around you who you trust and who understand their assigned issue area better than you do.

## What types of leadership qualities did you learn from President Bush?

I learned the power of dignity, integrity, and forgiveness. He really exemplified all of those time and again for me. ●