

## Edward Bernays: The Father of Public Relations

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## Edward Bernays: The Father of Public Relations

The late 1800s and early 1900s were the years when people were becoming “the public”; a mass whose thoughts and behaviours were being observed and studied. It was a time of new ideas and lots of changes. Edward Bernays, also known as “the father of public relations” was born around these times and was aware of the changes. He was also aware of how the public’s attitudes and actions were identifiable as well as adaptable (Wallman, n.d.). Bernays used his awareness to shape and construct the public’s way of thinking for the benefit of different markets. He did this with several different techniques and psychological tricks with the help of his uncle Sigmund Freud who is also known as the founder of psychoanalysis (Curtis, 2002). He succeeded in manipulating the public and making them do things he was aiming for from the start through psychological ways. His ways to avail and increase the sales of different markets worked on people (Gunderman, 2015).

The ways he influenced and altered the public’s way of thinking and ideologies are still remarkable. His techniques and manipulations to help increase sales are still used by many different brands and companies today. With the development of technology and the creation of social media applications, his psychological manipulations started to get used in online advertisements, contributing to online sales as well. In this essay, I will show two examples of how Edward Bernays manipulated consumers for the benefit of specific products and their companies’ public relations as well as how these manipulation tactics affect markets nowadays.

### **How to Manipulate Public Opinion**

“He who seeks to manipulate public opinion must always heed it,” (Bernays, 1928). According to Bernays, public opinion is the attitudes of the general public that are resistant to change after being reinforced over and over and have become traditional. He believed these ideas

made it difficult for new ideas to flourish. Shaping old ideas into accepting new ones was his idea of public opinion manipulation, or simply, propaganda. So, the manipulator had to fully understand what public opinion was about a subject and why it was widely accepted. They had to figure out a way to make the new idea fit with the public interest (Bernays, 1936). For this, psychology and market research were key requirements.

Bernays' and his colleagues' success in marketing campaigns came from their consideration of psychology research. Bernays in particular focused on Freud's psychoanalysis theories to figure out what people's basic desires and drives were to channel them towards whichever idea or product he needed to sell to the public (Curtis, 2002). He accomplished this by finding ways to link what he was selling with people's self-image and desire for self-fulfilment, chiefly using celebrities or other authority figures such as industry professionals that the masses followed (Papakonstantinou, Panigyrakis, & Kyriacou, 2019). So, brands became extensions of people's selves.

### **Torches of Freedom**

One of Bernays' most known acts is his "Torches of Freedom" movement which changed many people's views about women smoking in public. During his time, smoking was considered taboo for women. In addition to that, it was put forward from market research that the green packaging of cigarettes made them less desirable for women. After noticing the low sales of cigarettes, they figured that the taboo of women smoking and the colour of the packaging affected the company negatively, so they asked for Bernays' help. Because the price of changing the packaging colours would be too expensive for the company to handle, Bernays came up with another idea to solve this problem. Instead of changing the colour, he decided to make the colour more likeable and fashionable amongst women so it wouldn't be undesirable for them. He achieved

this by convincing fashion designers to add that specific shade of green to their fashion shows and by holding a “Green Gala” (Kopp, 2006).

Not stopping here, he also accomplished breaking the taboo of women not being able to smoke in public. He made this come true by linking Lucky Strike cigarettes with the women’s liberation movement. He achieved this by asking his female secretary, Bertha Hunt, to pass herself off as a women’s rights advocate and send telegrams to a select few American debutantes, rich and influential young women, to urge them to light cigarettes while marching down Fifth Avenue in New York (Mostegel, 2019). He and Hunt deliberately did not share their connection with the American Tobacco Company. During the march, Hunt answered questions from the press and said she got the idea to light cigarettes as a protest after a man on the street asked her to put out her cigarette because it was embarrassing. News reports of this march and this story successfully linked cigarettes with women’s emancipation without making it obvious that it was all a publicity stunt by the American Tobacco Company. With this, cigarette sales among women started to increase.

### **Luggage for Well-Dressed Women**

Another industry Bernays helped raise sales is the luggage industry. During the 1920s, the luggage industry was concerned that Americans weren’t purchasing enough luggage and the ones they were purchasing were too small. Due to this worry, they decided to ask for Bernays’ help. Bernays, once again, found a solution to this problem. He made people feel the need to buy more and bigger luggage in plenty of ways. He gave luggage to movies, sent articles to magazines titled such as “What the Well-Dressed Woman Wears on a Weekend”, encouraged shops to place luggage in front of their window displays, and a couple more things (Wallman, n.d.). With all of these examples, women felt the need to carry bigger luggage to have more clothes with them.

## **Modern Advertising and Social Media**

The marketing techniques Bernays has used to increase the profit of businesses are still applied today, and with technology and research into human behaviour being much more developed in comparison to the 1920s, these techniques have transferred into online markets too, arguably to greater effect.

With the rise of social media influencers and celebrities, companies started to get into partnerships with them. Since influencers and celebrities are mostly trendsetters and people tend to get inspired or “influenced” by them, companies got the idea to promote their products through these people. Because it is much easier to reach out and advertise products to certain people online, it is easier for businesses to control people’s feelings on a personal level which also helps to manipulate them more effectively. One great example of this could be a partnership the brand Beachwaver made with the social media influencer Erin Dugan Jurchak on the social media platform known as TikTok. In the video she made for the partnership with the brand, she connects the hair product with herself and her own life: “I wasn’t on PR lists, I was just making content with what I had, and I truly loved this so to see this now, a Beachwaver with my name on it, it means so much to me,” (Dugan Jurchak, 2022). She also makes a connection with the way that the product looks to herself again. “I always say, ‘hair and make-up, it should spark joy, it should spread fun’ and this is fun, this is so me”. This can be an example of Bernays’ marketing technique that was used for the luggage industry. He made several magazines publish articles about how women should bring more clothes and pieces with them so they would purchase bigger bags. Companies make partnerships with known people for them to introduce and advertise their products just like this. This method helps businesses exploit users’ vulnerabilities.

Influencers and celebrities aren't companies' only way of manipulating consumers for their products. Online businesses also influence purchasers' decisions by presenting the things they are selling in certain ways (Birkett, 2020). One example of this can be the choice of default in online decision-making. A lot of people on the internet tend to always choose the default option and the top search hit. The main reason for this is that search engines usually pick the most relevant site to be at the top of the page and users pick the first site with their trust in search engines. Jakob Nielsen, a web usability consultant, noted that the power of defaults was something that search engines could use to their advantage. According to Nielsen (2005), users tend to pick the top option even when options are moved around. This suggests that people are more likely to decide based on what the default is. Joachims and his co-partners (2005) made a study about search engines to see if people online tend to choose the top search hit no matter what the top search hit is. From their experiment, they observed that the top search hit was chosen by 42% of the users along with 8% of the people who clicked the second hit. After this test, they made another experiment where they change the places of the top and the second search hit. After this swapping was made, the top search hit was still the one that was hit the most with 34% while the second one was clicked by 12% of the users. Companies exploit people with this by paying websites to put their links at the top so it looks like their brand is the best option and more users click on their site. This technique makes it, to the consumer, seem like the one that the companies want them to use is the best option among all the other ones just like the way Bernays manipulated people into buying luggage by making them think bigger luggage is a better option by making several magazines publish articles and make it more seen. Manipulation of which choices are presented to customers by companies and which are not was part of Bernays' general strategies (Papakonstantinou, Panigyrakis, & Kyriacou, 2019) and online presentation of search results is a modern example of it.

## Conclusion

Bernays made some changes in the way of marketing products which changed the way things are promoted forever. Although Bernays' techniques are still used and effective today, the world's situation is much different than it used to be. The over-consumption and the environmental damage that it makes endangers the Earth and for it to support living beings (Stibbe, 2009).

“...[A] public that learns more and more how to express itself will learn more and more how to overthrow tyranny of every sort,” wrote Bernays in 1928 when discussing why one might manipulate public opinion and its repercussions. He believed that by understanding what people desire, a smart propagandist could change even the most ingrained behaviours in society to great advantage. He may have envisioned a more altruistic motive for such manipulation in his early writing (Bernays, 1938), but he was aware even then that the same was true for what he believed were harmful ends. In fact, in 1960, he publicly expressed regret over his role in making smoking more popular in the 1920s after being more informed about its health dangers (The Museum of Public Relations, n.d.). Learning from Bernays in this way and defending ourselves against these manipulation techniques by being aware of them and becoming more thoughtful about our consuming habits is a must in today's digital age. It is also important for advertisers to show more care in how they market products since they manipulate subjects that go far beyond the practical use of that product. Bernays himself, mistakes and all, considered it the propagandist's responsibility to be ethical; to use the art of public persuasion not for oppressive or misleading ends but for helping new ideas that can benefit everyone into the mainstream public opinion (Bernays, 1928; 1936). Companies today should heed this ethical standard as well.

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