

## **Mark Borkowski**

### **PR Industry Legend**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Mark Borkowski, PR industry legend. He began his career as a theatre publicist at 19, and soon became known as the go-to expert for publicity stunts. He started his own firm in 1987, working with consumer brands and celebrities including Led Zeppelin, Jimmy Page, Eddie Izzard, Live Nation, Nissan, Cadbury and Sony. Mark is a regular TV and radio pundit on the media, celebrity, and the art of publicity and has written two books.**

**Mark, thank you for joining me.**

Greetings, Paul.

**How are you doing?**

I feel a bit strange actually. I mean, how long you've been asking me to do this?

**I've been banging on at you for years to get you in that chair. You're a legend.**

Well, I thought, "Well, if you can nail Lynton Crosby, I'd better consider it." But it's weird for me, because you did mention very kindly in that intro that I do like to comment on other people. I don't actually like talking about myself.

**Well, this is going to be an hour of hell for you then, frankly.**

Yes, well, it's going to be odd, I must admit. It's going to be odd. It doesn't come easy to me, talking about me.

**Well, let's talk about your work for a bit. Because you've been doing this for 40 years. You're one of my heroes. I've been doing PR for 15 years, and I've got about a tenth of the talent and experience of you. Can you just tell me what the secret is?**

I've never worked a day in my life, and I have a passion for people. I've always had a passion for people's stories, people's adventures. And I've commercialised that, I

guess. I was incredibly lucky and fortunate. I think I would get, I don't know, 10, 12 emails a day from people wanting to get into PR. People who hear me and speak to me and say, "How do my kids get into PR?" And I lucked out. I think that I had a guiding spirit. My father died when I should have been working hard and getting into university. I always wanted to be a history teacher. I'm obsessed by history. And then I thought maybe I should go to art college. And then maybe then I thought maybe I should be a town and country planner.

### **A town and country planner?**

Yes, exactly.

### **How bizarre is that?**

And that's how confused a kid is, doing...

### **Milton Keynes would have looked very different if you'd have been on the town planning committee.**

But then my father died, which had a deeply profound effect on me. It was right in the middle of the punk explosion. I was fascinated by the Pistols, and I became incredibly fascinated by Malcolm McLaren. And I actually realised I couldn't sing, couldn't play an instrument, but actually, I loved it. I could see what was happening. I had an instinct, I read the NME when it was the sort of thing to read every week. And in fact, there's a front cover blown up on my office wall of the Grundy four-letter expletive moment on Thames which made them. And I thought, "This is generating such a conversation about them." And I wanted to be that person. But then university came bumping down to the ground because I've spent too much time... I look at my own kids now and how hard they've worked for their exams and get through university, I never was into that, and I came from a different time. And it was Thatcher, it was all the explosion going on there. And I just thought, I woke up one day and thought, "What hell am I going to do?" I failed miserably, getting into the various places I had at university, and I thought, "What am I going to do? I need to grow up." My father's death was quite a weight. And I did some sort of no-hoping sort of jobs. I ended up working in a pork pie factory at sort of 17, 18, I forget how old I was.

### **What were you doing?**

Selling pork pies.

### **Oh, you were selling the pies? You weren't adding the jelly.**

Selling the pies, Gala pies, the whole thing. I wasn't making them, but I got this job marketing them. I was pretty good at selling pork pies, you know? And I loathed it. I hated every moment of it. And I went to work every day and drove to this – it's now long deceased, this firm down in Gloucestershire, Hillier's – and I was miserable. I was absolutely miserable. And all my mates were in university, and I was sort of

doing this job, which paid quite well, I might add, but that's when I realised that money isn't your compass.

**It was more compensation, wasn't it, for the horrendous days.**

And god bless my mother. In the days when local newspapers advertise jobs, do you remember that? There was a job that my mother spotted for a trainee marketing and general management executive at a theatre in Swindon. And my mum said, "You've got to go for it." And I got an interview, remarkably. I mean, I wasn't qualified. And this is the other thing. There are things that happen in your life that are stellar moments that actually change your course of life. And some of them you bring on yourself unintentionally, some things happen when outside forces drive you. And I remember I was driving, and I got to the top of the road and I thought, "I'm never going to get a job. I'm not going to go to bloody Swindon. I'm going to get a job in theatre. I love theatre." I had a passion for theatre, I might add. And I remember my friend was home from university. It was Easter time, Easter break. I thought, "I'm going to see Neil." And as I was sort of turning the car, there was something inside of me that said, "You wanker. Go for it." And I turned the wheel, and I headed there. And I met an amazing man called Christian Dandecker. And this was in the days when regional theatre had subsidy, both locally and nationally. This was quite a vibrant, small theatre, and this amazing man called Christian Dandecker saw something, and I think at the time, the Arts Council were trying to improve sort of marketing and whatever, and here I am, a person who understood a little bit about marketing and had a passion for newspapers. And he took a chance, and gave me a job. And I started on April 1, 1978 as a kid. And I had, I forget what it was, about two grand, I had a £50 dress allowance, and Charles Savage, who's the artistic director now, a significant man in theatre, just did one thing. They took a risk. And those four letters, the most important letters, RISK, because all through my career, it's about clients, it's about me taking risks. And we're not in the age of taking risks now to be quite honest, it's a different age. But he took a risk on me. And from that moment, I discovered something that was quite extraordinary: that I could come up with crazy ideas to get bums on seats. And there was a moment where I was getting... they loved me, the Swindon Evening Advertiser and all this, they loved me because I would play with the media, and people would come in with these week-long runs. And I think we had a production of 'What, no Pyjamas?' or something with Fiona Fullerton, who was a sort of Bond girl and a sort of risqué model, and there was a sort of weird sort of poster. By today's standards it would be nothing, but it was a sort of Page Three-esque sort of poster. And I slapped posters up, and that was part of my job, getting the posters around, sort of fly posting and stuff like that. And it was a weird thing. And then I came back and they said, "Where have all the posters gone? They've disappeared? They've all been torn down." I thought, "That's a bit weird." So I put them up again. And same thing happened again. So just as I was leaving that day, there was a woman in tweeds who was in front of me. And she looked at me and she pointed her finger, "Pornographer! Pornographer!" And she left. And I subsequently found that this woman was the organiser of the Marlborough and Swindon Bridge Club. Next thing, I get a call from the local police station, who went to the box office and said could I come down, and I said yes. And I went to Swindon police station. "Detective Sergeant Barnes will see you." I said, "Oh, what's going on here?" And he said, "We've had a complaint from a Mrs..." whatever her name was.

### **Mrs Bridge Club.**

“For distributing pornographic literature.” And I said, “What?!” And he said, “Yes.” And out he brought out this poster, still damp with wallpaper paste, of this rather inane poster.

### **Presumably, they were clothed?**

Well, yes. Clothed.

### **It was suggestive but not indecent?**

Yes, suggestive. No, of course not. And I said, “Officer, this isn’t pornography.” He said, “I know.” I said, “Well, what are you going to do about it?” He said, “Well, I’m just saying that me and the lads would like 30 tickets, could we get a discount?” And I said, “Yes, I can give you a discount.” And I said, “But can I tell the local press?” And in those days the police were more open. He said, “Yes,” and it was on the front page. “Bobbies come to see saucy show,” and a whole report. I remember I was doing front of house.

### **Did Fiona meet them as well?**

She didn’t. But I remember that night I was doing front of house duty, you know, opening up the theatre and managing the usherettes and whatever. And I saw these two people, and they were clearly not theatregoers. And they sat there, and they thoroughly enjoyed the show. They loved it. And they came out and I spoke to them. I said, “Oh, we only came because we saw it in the Advertiser.”

### **The power of PR.**

And I thought, “That’s what you do.”

### **That’s the lightbulb moment.**

You have that moment, that was my secondary moment. And I came to London. That was it.

### **And did you come to London to seek fame and fortune?**

Well, again, seconds, another man who is incredibly powerful for me, who made my career, was a guy called Philip Headley, Theatre Royal Stratford East in the 1980s. It was the most radical theatre at the time, doing incredible work. It lost its grant. And he gave me a chance, he’d seen what I’d done, and he wanted to do it. And that was history. We were up against cuts, the Arts Council cuts. This was a theatre that was way ahead of diversity and inclusion. My first freelance job was for the black theatre cooperative – Trevor Rome, Michael Abbensetts, Tony Marchant – incredible drama, political theatre at its best at a time. And that was it. And then Philip gave me that

chance. And we were fighting to keep the building open when the Arts Council got its grant. Tony Banks at the time was very supportive, incredible time of people who have gone on to write incredible TV, and stars like Brenda Blethyn had been there and whatever. We were a family, and that's all connected to the family, the theatre, mother theatre, and its family. It was powerful for me, and some powerful friends. And I stayed there for four years developing it and getting it. Then I got my first West End show. And started to freelance and then built the agency up, and the rest is history really, in the sense that that understanding about bums on seats, and about sustaining a message. That's what it's about. You see everything now and it's quickly gone. Sometimes crisis, sometimes stories, sometimes vegan sausage rolls, or sometimes someone's floated something on the Thames for a stunt. It's about sustaining. And when you've got no money to spend on advertising or marketing, you need the power of the media. You need the power of influencers and word of mouth, which I built up. And you sustain a message. And that's what I've always tried to do is to say that every day is hard, you've got to come up with a creative solution every day. And I say to my people every day, you've got to come up with a solution. You've got to create magic for your clients. And if you're not doing that, and I think this is why PR has got very introverted and very trade media-focused, very awards-focused, which is fine. I've gone through it, I've won awards in the past, I'm not knocking people who do that, but we just lost it. We've just become slightly preening and self-important, because clients are important and sustaining that work. And it's tough. It's tough now. And it was tough in those days because... my business card used to say, 'PR Scum are human too'.

### **I've got your business card.**

Yes, because journalists would attack you. And I look at things now in terms of the sort of millennial culture, generation, whatever culture, and it's all very nice and it's good. I think they are a caring generation coming through who are obsessed rightly by the state of affairs at the moment, environmentally, politically and socially. But in those days, you were absolutely toasted alive. You were crucified. If they wanted to kill your client, they would kill your client, for no good reason. And that was a very hard lesson to learn, taking on some of the real Rottweilers of tabloid journalism back in the time. And it was fun and it was difficult. And yes, there was bullying and there was aggression, there was dirty tactics, and there was hacking. But that was what we got on with. And actually what I loved was the fact that we could come up with a solution for it. Come up for another way, pull the rug away from it. Don't go bleating to whatever. But I've seen different iterations of the media through the years. I'm pleased about that, and I'm thrilled and I cherish that. But I have so much more energy now than I've ever had before because it's an incredible time, as each generation is. I don't sit back. Particularly things like the Edinburgh Festival, I've got all my lot going to the Edinburgh Festival, we're even talking about the Edinburgh Festival in August now, my entertainment team at the moment, getting set for Edinburgh. I see some boring old gits who say, "Oh, Edinburgh is not what it used to be." No, it's not. And that's good it's not. It's a generation now to invent what it is within media, within whatever. It's not for people to sit back and think, "Oh, I can remember..." There was a lot of drunks. I mean, I've seen a lot of people, a lot of contacts I've had, ended up and wasted and dead because of the process. This whole idea that we all went down, which is true. You've got long lunches and it was a very...

### **Got rat-arsed.**

It wasn't good. That wasn't good. It wasn't good for anybody's health, and none of those sort of libations were particularly healthy. And a lot of people were crushed by it. And a lot of strong women came out of it. A lot of women were destroyed by it. A lot of men were destroyed by it. It was a brutal existence, because you were handling... you got that phone call on a Friday night for your client, and it looked pretty bad. And even if it was a nuanced story, or the story wasn't true, and it still happens to this day, once someone believes that that story is true – because that's the age we're in now, it's the post-truth age. How ironic, we've had April Fool's Day, and what's the point of April Fool's Day? Every day is bloody April's Fool's Day. And it's what the crowd feel, and when you see, when you're inside next to somebody who's got a significant crisis, the people getting at them for clickbait or stories, that they don't care. They don't care what they feel about destroying families or whatever. But nor does the audience care, ultimately. The audience want the story. Our life is one big game show at the moment.

### **The spectacle itself.**

The great publicists, I got obsessed about, I think it was around about the sort of moment when there was various relationships being faked, I think at the time, allegedly. Geri Halliwell and Chris Evans and all these sort of things being built up for PR purposes. And it was sort of heralded as something that was particularly new or whatever, and reality shows kicked off. And there was all this obsession about throwing out these ne'er-do-wells into society. And I used to say, "Oh, this is all new." And I said, "No, it's not." Because if you're a student of the game, if you actually look back at the game, nothing changes. We are all driven by that curiosity to get inside that titillating story. And great publicists, whether it was the great PT Barnum, or Harry Reichenbach, or whoever. They knew how to activate the crowd. And some of the darkest publicists in my estimation were propaganda merchants, people like Joseph Goebbels. I mean, nothing has changed. The crowd is now leaderless. If you look at the chaos in Brexit now, it's because we have no leaders. We have no response. The problem of Brexit, both remain and leave, the remain campaign and the Brexit campaign where appalling campaigns.

### **I completely agree.**

So this is a mess we're in now because of vested interests. You can see what's going on in parliament now. Everybody's got an eye on the next job, keeping their seat in election. Corbyn stirring up for the RG group. People are looking at it and saying, "Hang on a minute, what about us?" And nobody is finding a way of communicating something that could've saved this sort of issue. And it's down to banks of lies, and fear factor or whatever. And the European Union have got a lot to answer for, because who has ever projected the value of the European Union? So this is where PR absolutely fails, because you have process. And what I see now, particularly when you get higher up the food chain, people buy process, they don't buy results. We buy fancy process that quantifies that sort of job. The success of a campaign is whether you're in a pub, and a person in the pub you don't know, and they ask you what you do. You say, "I do publicity," and they don't actually know

what that is. And you explain it. “Oh, I’ve heard about that, I know about that.” Or they’re talking about your campaign, or they’re talking about campaigns that matter. And you don’t hear that, because things dissipate so quickly. And never before have I seen such an explosion of new businesses, which is good. Everything is now moving to micro-niche. The big operators, the Edelmans of the world are still stronger than ever. There’s a very interesting sort of powerful base within that, but everything is becoming localised and micro. And people from outside this country... we’re in a bit of a bubble at the moment, and I don’t think we consciously understand how the world see us. They think this country, it’s image is the Royal Family, is the Olympics, which was seven years ago. And we’re still living off that at the moment, which is a great exercise in projecting something. But it was projecting heritage shit. Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony was a mark of genius, and it’s sustained lots of things. So you can see powerful communication events, pseudo-events, that really make an impact. But come on guys, let’s get real about what the world is now and what the challenges we feel in the world. I’m really, really impressed with Extinction Rebellion’s work at the moment, bunch of activists, and I know those guys quite well, and I think they’re gradually nudging us towards realisation into what we’ve got to face. And I think that there’s a huge amount of too much patting each other on a back. Other PR people patting other people...

**I don’t like reading PR Week for that reason, because everyone is just congratulating each other.**

Well, it is self-congratulatory. It is important for people to be in it, and it is important if you’re setting up a company. I completely see the value of it, and I completely see why it’s important. It’s all trade publications, everybody moans about trade publications. I don’t care what it is, whether it’s Variety or The Stage or the Mechanical Engineer’s Gazette. Everybody moans about if they’re not in, and takes it for granted when they are in. That’s not the point. But the point is actually, is words and deeds and actions are three different things. And I think there needs to be more actions rather than people positioning, ever has it been that. So my main motto, my main thing, I tell all my people, everything’s different. Everything’s the same.

**The more things change, the more they stay the same. Do you think that breakdown in trust though, this lack of leadership that we have in western society, is an opportunity for PR people like us? Or is it actually that the rise of Trump and people like Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, where they feel that it’s actually a backlash against this over-polished type presentation? People like Tony Blair and Barack Obama, they say they’re too polished, every single comma and every single word is perfect, and they’re like so-called “real people” like Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, whether they’re right or wrong, politically...**

Well, “real people” are not...

**Normal people feel an actual genuine connection with them.**

I think it’s complex. I think it’s incredibly complex. I think we have the hindsight of looking back at things with 2020 vision. And there’s always a myriad of arguments

that actually shape things. I think the problem is the media are looking for the soundbite now. He who can conjure the best soundbite wins, and we do not have the capacity in this digitally, with our minds like goldfish, spinning around to actually hover on something and really digest it. We've lost... we have a generation do not want to read long-form, and how many websites now throw up, "This is a minute read. This is a four-minute read. This is a 10-minute read." It's interesting I think where the New Yorker and the New York Times have sort of exploding in actually doing more. I think the Times was a very good paper at the moment. The Guardian is trying as well, but irrespective, everybody's trying to come up with a...

### **Be bite-sized.**

Yes, they're trying to come up with an easy answer for what is a very... I think... I mean, I think it is, certainly television and the video previous to that, the image, whether it was Kennedy or whatever, the mark of elections are won by the force of personality that people bought into. And look what's happening in eastern Europe now, this sort of this comedian or this show host is going to win the presidential thing. I think people just are familiar with people. And all those people who you mentioned, from Boris Johnson to Farage or Trump, are showmen. They're absolutely showmen, and history will tell us that showmen win. Showmen go out there.

### **PT Barnum, all of that.**

Yes, it's a didactical... whatever. It's very difficult for us to sort of buy into that sort of person. And I remember in the old days that you wouldn't get a celebrity in a broadsheet. And I remember the Telegraph running something on, I think it was either Vanessa May and it was photogenic moment, she was on the front page, and I thought, "My god, the Telegraph are putting some facile story..." And something has changed there, because this is a drive for readership, for clicks, for advertising, for likes and whatever. And I think people have become a lot more pragmatic about the news. James Harden's new thing, Tortoise, is a very interesting concept that he's doing with Katie Vanneck at the moment. I think it's a really interesting concept of slow news, slow digestion, but education is also in a problem now, in terms of how we're training people to get to university through example; we're not in a process of teaching people, or learning. I mean, I was lucky to have some really great teachers who mentored me and brought my interests alive. I mean, I've got a friend who's a teacher who's actually buying his own calculators for his class because the teachers ran out of money. There's a school in Bristol which is down to three and a half days a week at the moment because they can't afford to open four days. I mean, these are important things, and this is what annoys me about Brexit, is that it has actually taken us out of really important issues in the last two years. Because we're focusing on a bunch of braying people, trying to sell us the idea that, come tomorrow, we will be drinking Watneys Red Barrel and watching black and white movies on a Sunday afternoon and playing golf. It's so complex. So, therefore, when you've got these powerful communicators who just don't understand soundbites, they are bewitching and dragging people, because they're saying things. Donald Trump does not build anything he says up on any factual thing, and I would be very surprised to see Donald Trump not being second-term president, no matter what it is. We've got

analytics where you see noise generating around certain things, we analyse for our clients. It's coastal in America. You can see these flare-ups and heat maps. It's very cold. East coast, west coast, obviously Washington or whatever. But the rest of the places dark. No one's clicking into this. And I think we can be very hubristic. We have a media bubble in London, which I benefit from. But we're not interested in what's happening in Sunderland or Swansea or whatever, and despite Channel 4 positioning themselves as, "We're going out to the regions now and moving out of London," and stuff like this. This is all virtue signalling. And I just think that Brexit and Trump, there's a group of the media losing touch with what people have actually sort of fed on. And there's some very clever people, and I look at the people that talked about, and there are so many interesting people way below the waterline that are affecting our life, who are not sought out, not got at. How long did it take to get to Cambridge Analytica, you know, and what Nigel Oaks had been doing before Cambridge Analytica was way back in the '80s. Using data, using basics to actually inform opinion. And we look at the celebrity, the easy clickbait angle, without actually reporting the hard stuff. And there isn't the resources really to do things, in a way. And I think the newspapers, particularly the broadsheets, lost confidence in themselves around the '90s. And the Modern Review was very significant, what Toby Young and Julie Burchill did, in popularising culture, making it feel a little bit more intellectual. But I look at things, and today there was the most ridiculous headline that was in the Daily Mail about the English National Opera, which I know something about, for the crisis they've been through. And the new director, Stuart Murphy, who comes from TV, an interesting appointment, he said, "We're going to drag in audiences, new audiences, to the ENO for opera work. So we're going to invite the likes of Holly Willoughby and Davina McCall to tweet about the performance, and this is going to attract a young audience." What a pile of rubbish!

### **They're chasing the physical equivalent of clicks, i.e. footfall.**

It's celebrity again. God bless Holly and Davina, whether they want to spend six hours sitting through the Misa singers is neither here nor there, but what planet are these people on? And again, it's a headline. It's a celebrity, and it's a clickbait. And no one is thinking about how do you get the difficult questions, where do you get the difficult ideas through a media that are under-resourced or lazy, looking for headlines, looking for immediacy, looking for exclusives, looking to get ahead of the Twitter trends? How do you do that when everybody now has got a voice, or supposedly has got a voice? Someone says, "Well, it's big on Twitter." And I said, "What? Thirteen people who've got 10 followers say this is a big idea?" These are screwed metrics. And the biggest part of our industry at the moment is everybody's selling you evaluation tools, or selling you ways of automating your content or whatever. It's distracting, because it takes time to develop a story. It takes time to build influence around it. And whether or not Piers Morgan or whoever sort of jumps up and down on it, they're doing it for their own... you know, I like Piers. Big respect.

### **But he's playing Piers Morgan.**

And Piers Morgan could stand.

### **He could become a prime minister.**

Yes, exactly. You're asking that question.

### **He's got eight million follows on Twitter, and he's a character.**

But when you see some of the decisions newspapers have made for senior positions over the years, that's slightly dumbing down the process. And this is just an observation, there's pragmatic commercial decisions we made around these things, but everybody should take a very good look at himself at the state we're in at the moment, and the confusion we face, and say, "Actually, be careful what you wish for."

### **Are we complicit in it? I mean, we as in the audience, the viewers, the listeners, the readers?**

Of course we're complicit in it. I mean, if people didn't want to know about the goings on of a celebrity, in the heyday of the News of the World, it's simple: they don't buy the News of the World. I mean, it's called choice. And people talk to me about, "Oh, advertising and PR is so aggressive." It's choice. What we're doing, we should be offering people choice. And everybody is fascinated. This is not a modern thing. At the height of the silent movie era, there were magazines selling people's lifestyles. Nothing changes. We're fascinated by that. So of course we're complicit. But we've lost the ability to find true, critical opinion that is beyond just blathering some soundbite on Twitter and thinking, "That is genius." Because Twitter is genius. They're often fantastic people on it. I noticed something yesterday about Jameela Jamil saying, "Oh, she's feisty." Yes, of course she's feisty. It's very good. It's very easy to troll people. It's very easy to be unkind to people. People don't think of the effects, because they got this voice, it's sort of outside themselves, they're fuelling. And the greatest threats to us are the likes of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, and I think it's highly ironic, highly ironic, that a Prince Harry barks out yesterday that how gaming and social media is awful, two days after they announced...

### **Launched on Instagram.**

Instagram feed. I mean, are they insane? But of course, they're not insane because...

### **Because they didn't have a messaging grid.**

Yes, I love that one. But it's two days after! Because we are like goldfish, we're spinning around a bowl. "What's next? What's next? What's next?" Nothing is remembered in the way that it used to be, and would actually sustain people. And sometimes that's good because people make mistakes. People are making mistakes, and people should be allowed to recover from those mistakes. And they should not be allowed to repeat those mistakes. But at least they should be able to recover and given a second chance. There's no second chances for a lot of people.

### **Game over.**

Yes. And particularly if you're pale, male and stale, mate, it's history.

**And how have things changed in the job recently in terms of dealing with crises? Because it's so easy now to destroy someone's reputation, or a brand's reputation, with a rogue tweet or something in error. I mean, Churchill I think said the problem with the world is a lie can get halfway around the world before the truth has even got its boots on. I mean, now you can tweet something, and within sort of 20 minutes, your career can be over.**

I think it's true. Your career potentially could over. But you know what, it was harder back then to protect people. It was much harder, because it felt sometimes you were fighting a battle. What's interesting now is if there is a half-truth, there is a piece of fake news, there is a bit of nuancing going on. If your client has got a big enough channel, or he has the ability to position his argument from his own lips or from her own lips, then I can go viral, and that can undo quite a lot. I think it's always about moving quickly, it's never changed that. It's always about having the best you can in terms of trusting relationships to build that up. I think a lot of people who are doing crisis now, who are very good at their trade, have been around the block for a long time. And even in Hollywood, certainly up to five or six years ago, most of the people wrangling significant reputations were north of 40, and had seen it all. And those sort of people know what it takes. I think that now we have more mechanisms to counter. We have better relationships with legal firms, which I think a certain part of me dies if I have to then commission a legal firm, they have to start writing.

**I find more often than not now, it's the legal firms that are commissioning us.**

Yes, a bit. It's a dual thing. IPSO doesn't work – I mean, it's just useless – and of course, what you find now is that a story will be tried out on a digital platform, and it can be quickly taken down if someone cries foul. So I think it's the technology that has always changed things. The thing about PR folk is that they've always grabbed technology right at the top of it. Whether it was using telegrams, whether it was using faxes, whether it was using mail merge, whatever the technology was, the first people to jump on that with communicators, PR people. And I think we were the first to actually see the advantage of social media, even sometimes even before our clients, because it could become a significant medium to tell the story. So what doesn't change is the human reaction to it. And people say to me, "Mark, my kid wants to do PR, or media or whatever. What course should he study? Should he go to Bournemouth or Westminster?" And I say, "Do anthropology, understand human behaviour." The great publicist understood the crowd, understood the heard, understood what motivated people, and the great political spin masters understood that. So I think things have changed in that things can evaporate very quickly; I think that you have the ability of reforming a story very quickly if it's untrue, if you can create a narrative, a counter-narrative to it, that can help things. It helps if your client has huge confidence in himself, or herself, in what they do. And I've always said, people get the PR they deserve, because some people find it very difficult to communicate. I think there have been some great politicians who should have got into power, who might've changed things for us, who just weren't fit for the media age. And now we are looking at personality before the substance of what people are saying. And I'm repeating myself slightly, but how people feel about those people in front of you.

**But isn't the choice of whether you have a leader ultimately an emotional one, because the public can't have metrics on whether Boris Johnson can type at a certain rate of words per minute, or whether he's got the right connections. It's all effectively subjective, is it not?**

I think people, to a certain extent... we're better informed.

**I mean, Theresa May seems to be reasonably competent, but she's clearly socially and/or...**

That's an interesting segment to put. I mean, clearly Theresa May has a sense of duty and purpose. It's impossible. It's like trying to get to the moon on a tandem, really. I mean, with Jezza on the back. I think that we have become a lot more partisan. We've become a lot more tribal. We've become a lot more niche. We've got a lot more... we're stuck in whatever bubble we're in, and breaking out of that bubble is very difficult when you're served stuff that you need. And I think there should be a lot more critical appraisal of the systems that we use for ease. There's not a free lunch. You use Facebook or you use Twitter, or whatever you use to express your views or get your news, if it's free, what's the price? What are you giving away? And I think people are waking up to that, to a certain extent after what happened to Cambridge Analytica. But these things are multi-levelled, and I think that one has to... we don't have the ability to sit back. And I used to encourage my folk to gaze out the window. And somebody said to me, "Where's the... they're wasting hours." And I said, "Well, actually reflection is incredibly important for a creative process." You don't come up with an idea. You work as a team. I've been lucky to have many incredible people working for me in all different levels. Some people call it a cult. I'm deeply, deeply proud of people who've gone on to set up their own companies, have gone on to represent brands and whatever. And I've got a great set of young people at the moment, and I'm pretty lucky to attract great people. Because it's not about me, it's about all those people doing the hard work, but you have to create that environment. And one of the things is actually creating a reflective environment for people to think about what they're doing, and to be sensible about it, rather than making dumb decisions because a bunch of sort of cool kids in Shoreditch are telling them that. And it's actually having the strength of your personality to really be positive about what you're doing and why you're doing it, and having a real goal, and attracting the sort of clients that will allow you to do that. Because sometimes – and we've all done it – you chase the money. And sometimes you're chasing the very big fee, and a very difficult job, that's the ones that actually test your credibility, it tests your morals, and everybody will have those challenges. And that can pivot and change the way corporate culture works within our organisation.

**Look at Bell Pottinger.**

Yes. I mean...

**He brought them down.**

Clearly, that's a very complex story. And I think we've seen the top level of it. I think it's very deep. I looked at that story, and of course, the entire virtue signalling PR profession sort of leapt on it. I think it stemmed from a situation where they had been involved with a bit of a downturn in fees, down to an exposé the independent did, and catching them with a fake lobbying job that exposed some of the things.

**The PRCA wanted to be seen to hold them to account, make an example of them.**

They have to. One of their competitors, a couple of their competitors, and one, in particular, said to me, "Why would I want to be part of an organisation that's going to fire me?" So I thought, "Well, that's interesting." So you think that yes, the PRCA did some great work in training people, and bringing people together, and helping people and creating rules, and giving people an indication, particularly if you are growing company. And they used to have some very stark metrics to join. So as a trade body, I know how hard they work. But at the end of the day, sometimes it reflects an insular world. And I always think that how many of the really interesting 'PR companies' are not members of the PRCA?

**I resigned about 10 years ago.**

Yes. Well, I'm still in there.

**Are PR people born with that talent? Is innate, or is it something that you can learn? I spoke to a friend of mine, a senior PR guy a few years ago, and he said. "You're either a natural communicator or you're not." And he said, "It's like the clap. You've either got it or you haven't."**

Yes, the old Hollywood publicists used to call it "the stuff". People had the stuff, your clients had the stuff. Listen, you asked about changes. A lot of changes now is the fact that... and some of my old mates in PR moan about this, "Oh, why don't people go out? Why don't people lunch?" They don't want to do that. And that's fine. They communicate through other means to talk to people. Then, if you're working in a digital platform, which is more or less a battery hen farm where you don't see the light of day and there's no clocks there, you don't have any time to... and it's a different way of networking now. I personally don't think it's the best way of networking.

**I like to eyeball someone.**

You just need to meet people, you need to understand people, and get people together. Journalists don't have the time to get out there. You can't put press junkets together like it used to do, you know, over two or three days, going to some exotic place to meet your client. So it's sort of different. So are people born PRs? Yes, in any profession, you're good. I mean, there are certain people born to be an undertaker, there are certain people born to be accountants, there are certain people born to be a golf pro, born to be an entrepreneur. I think you just have to be lucky enough to understand, or get that opportunity to be that sort of person. And the problem now, everybody sees PR as something that is achievable, and sexy and

whatever. And everything is changing, and PRs will be redundant in 10 or 15 years. We will have AI versions of ourselves communicating messages. I mean, the work that's going on AI is quite staggering in terms of that. But ultimately there is a point where human contact is important. And if you can't communicate, if you're an introvert, then the art of PR is not for you. But then again, you might have a different scale. I was sitting with any company you're not going to win the open with a putter. And every company needs a skillset of people. You can't have a bunch of leaders out there, you've got to have the support staff. You're going to have people underneath that. And I was very keen to create a structure where everybody had a voice. Some of the best ideas used to come from the person on the reception. I remember that adage about the cleaners at NASA. The cleaners at NASA put man on the moon. It's true! And from the man who gave me my first break, Christian Dandecker was obsessed about the cleanliness of the theatre. He doesn't want someone going in and sitting down and actually sitting in someone's chewing gum, they've left on the seat because that's the experience you have. So I think it's a holistic thing you look at, and you look for people with differing strengths, differing personalities to make up what is a family or a cult to actually do the best. And that's a...

### **A family or a cult!**

And that's difficult thing, because you never get a perfect signal.

**When you're interviewing people, because you're like me, you're in the hiring and firing game. Do you use your experience and your gut to kind of make an assessment of someone's sort of the first 30 seconds you think, "Yes, this person's got it, or they haven't"? Or is that unfair?**

If someone impresses me in the first 30 seconds, I don't employ them. You know what?

### **I've got a chance then?**

Well, no, because PR people, whatever their skillset, are pretty good at selling themselves. So it's impossible. So I never meet anybody first round. I have a brilliant HR, a woman, Angela, who keeps in line, and I have other people in the company go through that, and then I meet them. And yes, at some point at the interview I've got to think, "Can I go on a long train journey to Hull with this person?"

**And the second question is, why would you ever go to Hull, of course, but that's a separate question.**

Hull was city of culture! You're a man of that part of the world. Let's not be regionalist here, Paul! The thing is that you're looking for people with ambition and passion. you're looking at people who will not... I used to kick people out my office. I had a bunch of people who worked on the Sony account and they wouldn't leave the office. They love that client so much. They love the work. The cruel thing is that when you've worked so passionately... we had Vodafone for seven years, we launched Vodafone, I remember one of our jobs was getting people to use text messaging.

And it's a hell of a thing to lose a huge client like that. Not just financially, which was a bit of a blow, but for the team who worked so hard. And I was with one of my old people over lunch yesterday, he's got a very neat new PR company, which is going places. And he was talking about all the teething pains and growing pains and the client relationship issues that he has. "It's no different from anybody else," I tell him. Everybody feels that, and you just have to find a way of navigating through and having the room and the ability to make the right choices about your clients, because pitching is grovelling shamelessly for work. It's a complete stitch-up. It's never ultimately about the work you are going to do for them. Usually in a pitch, you never, ever do the work you say at the pitch, it changes. It's whether those people across the room like you. And that's sort of irrational really, because you can have a lot of likability and have no ability. And secondly, you can keep a client going because you're pretty damn good at process. And before they know it, they're thinking, "We spent what on what?"

**It's difficult though, because is it a skill to pick up the phone a seventh time when six journalists have already turned you down? I'd say it's more of a character trait more than a skill.**

Well, if you're saying the same thing to a journalist on your sixth phone call and getting a sixth reaction, you're doing something wrong.

**This is why I could never work for you.**

In a conversation with a journalist, you've got to know the journalist and what turns them on. You got know what the journalist writes about and what they're interested in. And you've got to have something that is *news*. It's got to be something that's *relevant* within it. Not that I exist, therefore I'm looking for publicity. And there's a lot of people come in and say, "Well, I've done this." I say, "What's interesting about that? Thousands of people are doing that." And I remember somebody coming in, and I said, "Well, I've seen two other people in your space." He said, "There's nobody else in my space is good as me." And I said, "Well, actually there are, and here's a piece on a website that actually shows what they're doing in your space." And people are just hubristic. So that's sometimes difficult. I mean, talking truth to clients is the toughest thing, particularly at crisis. And I've got a very difficult week ahead of me next week, dealing with someone who cannot accept what's happening to him. And he's just got to get with the times. So you do become part shrink, particularly when you're dealing with that. You've got to reach people. But people don't fire clients enough. And I've done it a couple of times. I've done it enough.

**I did that once last week, but I haven't done it for about three years before that. And it was quite stressful, actually. You feel guilty.**

Well, you got to think of a team of seven people, possibly five people, three people, whatever the team is working on the job. And you're going to think about what does that say to them? Because you're making the decision. Your instinct, your knowledge and what's coming down the pipe is not what they are, and they don't understand that.

**It actually motivated my team that worked on this client, because they weren't a pleasure to work for, really. In fact, it was demoralising.**

Yes. Well, you can't do that. And I think you asked what was different now, people are expecting a lot more from the workspace, is a lot more that they're not buying into the fact that they are going to possibly work for you. Loyalty is not at a premium as such. Although I've been blessed, I must say. I've been blessed by people who have been incredibly loyal to me. And I sometimes regret I don't keep up with them as I should because I have a life.

**But I've got people that have worked for me for two or three years and then we've parted amicably. And I think, "Well, that was a good period of time for them to work for me, and it was time for them to move on."**

Yes, true. And I think that that's the case, but I think people don't come in with that sort of sensation. It is very much... and listen, it's an incredibly personal experience that you go through with people, and you've got to create structure. You've got to create a structure to allow people to develop, they've got to be learning. I did my best, though I'm not sure if I achieved it all the time, to create a learning environment where I could bestow some of my experience on people, whether it was wisdom or not, I don't know. But give them some idea of the way it goes, whether it's a blogger or an influencer, a journalist, a client or whatever. You've got to understand human emotion. You've got to understand what makes that human tick, and sometimes if you manage to make contact with somebody who's important, and they've had a bad day, don't take it personally.

**Now, when you went through your career at the beginning, you said you'd started with the first West End show and then you said you went freelance and then started an agency, and the rest is history. And I loved how you summarised that 30 years in 20 seconds there. Do you have an ideal amount of people for the size for your agency, for the Borkowski Agency? Because I've done this, I've been in the same game as you for 15 years, and sometimes we've been 30, sometimes we've been five, and I'm still trying to get the levers in the right order. At the moment, we're around 20. That seems to be about the right size for me. And when I've gone bigger than that, it's always gone wrong.**

It just depends on what you want to achieve. I think that if you want to remain a boutique business, you know, there were some fantastic arts consultancies that started up when I was going, that are still four or five people, and do incredibly well, have great influence and make good money. I would assume there are growing agencies who want to own the world, and who want to have offices in every country in the world. I think it is what your business plan is, where you want to be, how you see yourself going. Where do you want to be in three, four, five, six, ten years and marking that. And the heart of it, you've got to have a real, strident financial backbone. You have to have a structure of people around you, a good board, to make that work. And sometimes it's worked for me, sometimes it hasn't. And it's what your dimension is. I mean, for me, how I thought my business would be in '89 is not how it was in '95, and it wasn't in 2005, how it certainly wasn't in 2009, and how it wasn't now to this day. So opportunities...

**No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy. I think that was Hannibal, or misattributed to him.**

Yes, I retraced Hannibal steps with three elephants and Ian Botham, back in 1989. That was an experience, and I so I got to know Hannibal's footsteps really quite well.

**Well, that actually brings me onto my next question, because you are the master of the publicity stunt, and coming up with some genius things like gift-wrapping a helicopter to publicise Harrods. And didn't you once fill Selfridges with 700 naked people?**

Yes, Spencer Tunick.

**I notice you didn't call me for that.**

That was the most bizarre day in my life. It was a Sunday and me and Patsy were working on the account for Selfridges at the time, and I think James Bidwell, and we were the only three clothed people in the entire store. But there's a classic example.

**We'll use that as a pull quote, by the way.**

Yes, Peter Williams, Bev Churchill, James Bidwell, they were an incredible team of people who went on to sell, with these huge events that we contributed to. I've lost track on some of the more wild and wonderful things I did. And of course...

**Is that where you get the most enjoyment now? Are you kind of stunt oriented?**

I don't know. Listen, I think it's a very dangerous world. For some of the stunts I pulled off, I've been nearly arrested, I've nearly killed myself, I nearly killed clients. I've seen clients be fired. That word, risk, you have to do in a stunt for it to go around the globe. And of course, it's different now because you can't really be part of, you know, the sort of fake news twirl. I remember looked at, for Typhoo, one of the stunts I wanted to pull off was to take the Hollywood sign – and this is before Photoshop – so I employed a crack team of ex-military people, and we spent two weeks looking at what it would be for one moment to take off the two Os in Hollywood and turn it into Typhoo. And we could have done it, and it was quite affordable to do, and we looked into it, and it was sort of post-9/11. So there was a... anyway, we had a meeting with the client, and the client said, "So the what's the negative side of this?" And the guy said, "Well, my guys probably would have to have bulletproof vests because there's good opportunity they'd be shot." And the client looked at me.

**"I'm going to spend 20 years in the super max."**

And I remember saying, "It's a great opportunity. Why don't we go for it?" But yes, there were a couple of great clients. I've got a great client now, Bill Muirhead, who is an advertising man, he was agent general of South Australia. I've had him for 15 years. He loves a great bit of creativity. And I remember wrapping a house, I mean, that was incredible. I wrapped an entire house to give away for a Valentine's Day

present. And it went right the way around the world. Santa... also, a little kid who said, "Will Santa get down my chimney?" And we actually worked on as Santa Perfect Chimney. The dimensions of what it would take to get Santa down a chimney and putting you up and down and whatever. There's got to be a real sense of narrative for it, not some floating...

### **Cobbled together thing.**

Floating something down the Thames. It's got to have, at the root of the story, that journalist looks at it and thinks, "Hang on a minute, this ain't right, but do you know what, it's fun." And I think what's changed for me is that I used to be someone who's obsessed by the basement. The basement was a front page story in the nationals that would just spark things off. And it doesn't exist any more.

### **Is that because of the risk-averse "health and safety" culture?**

Yes, well, I think rightly so. I mean, some of the stuff I did for the circuses presented in my early career. I mean, no strings and a safety net, doing incredible stunts on the tops of buildings or whenever, for photo opportunities or whatever. I mean, God, they were fearless. And Archaos, which was this chainsaw-juggling crazy circus I went in the road with when I was a kid, they were incredible. They didn't care. As long as it was going to get us publicity we'd do it. People look at things... I noticed a great stunt yesterday was Lima Yoga for a hotel in Keswick, and I thought it was a beautiful stunt. Good looking people doing their yoga poses amongst a bunch of sort of exotic animals for a hotel who invented Lima, that was brilliant. That's just sweet and great. And is there really a thing called Lima? Who cares. It's a great photo. And I think where you push it is where there is a sort of edge that there was not a sense of fun with it. Publicity stunts come with a buffer. And I'm very impressed with what Taylor Herring, James Herring's company now, I think do some very clever stuff. I think there's a lot of people trying to do it. We did the corporate world for Beano, and they were doing consumer work and they came up the idea of actually writing a letter to Jacob Rees-Mogg to say stop impersonating Walter Brown. And it went everywhere, because it's clever. I think a lot of people do stunts that get a lot of awards, but do nothing because they just dissipate very quickly. I think it sustains, and there is a formula. There is a formula for a publicity stunt, I own that formula, and I know how it works. I can bet you if you hit these elements within the formula, your stunt will work, and it will go global – because that's the point. You've got to go outside of this country if you want it to be a success. I remember with the Jim Rose Circus, I let a bunch of scorpions loose in the BBC greenroom of Pebble Mill, I mean, that was chaos that brought the whole of the BBC...

### **You really ought to be doing 30 to life really, shouldn't you?**

Could I do that now? I mean, did I check whether... I did say to somebody have the stings been removed.

### **Oh, you're covered then. You're all right.**

But I don't know whether they were. And I walked an elephant across the road.

**Isn't history written by the victor then, the fact that you got away with that and no one was harmed means you're a legend. It could've gone wrong.**

A leg-end maybe, not a legend. I mean, definitely not a legend, I'm just one in a line of a lot of people who've done some great fun things, and can tell a few stories about it. Now look, there are things that went tragically wrong. I mean, I had a crap idea once, I thought it was a great idea, when I launched the first Nando's. And my idea was that we would do, and it's even crazy talking about it – and if Miranda's listening to this, you worked hard on this. But we got helium balloons, and we flew pieces of fried chicken all over Ealing. And if you collected this chicken, you were encouraged not to eat it obviously, but if collected this, you could go in, it could have been a plastic, fake piece of chicken, but no, it had to be a real piece of chicken.

**Riddled with campylobacter.**

And weeks later, rats and cats and were dying of this. It was a terrible idea.

**I disagree. I think it sounds brilliant.**

No, that was a crap idea. But I mean, I had a great client, Robbie, who set up Nando's, a South African who had done some aggressive PR stunts in South Africa. He was a great supporter of it, but I didn't keep the account. I wonder why.

**What's next for you? Is it more of the same? Will you still be doing this 20 years from now?**

Well, it's two things. Either the business or the business will retire me, because I've had enough of it, but I can't think of anything else I want to do. I look at a lot of my friends who sold up and did very well, and they went around the world or they bought their 12 houses or their collectible cars or whatever. And you know what, each one of them said, "I want to get back into the business." Because actually it's a very exciting business to be in. And also, you get a call, I had a call yesterday, and the most extraordinary call. And I don't think a week goes by when I don't hear something. But you hear fantastic things. You see the underbelly, you see something else that's going on. And I would be cut off from that. So if my health gives up, then obviously that's an issue. If my mind...

**You seem to be in fine fettle.**

My brain doesn't stop working, but I don't think... I look at some of the... again, when I wrote The Fame Formula and I had the joy of seeing some of the most powerful people of a generation, many of which have died, half of them. After I came back... I remember coming back from two trips to LA. Every time I came back, the person I interviewed had died! So I didn't publicise that.

**You've got the reverse Midas touch.**

As long as I still have the capability and still I can do it, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't do it. The day it becomes like work to me, then it's time to pack it up. But where we'll all be in the next year, or two years, who knows? I mean, anybody who makes plans, God's laughing at you.

**Mark, I know you will dispute this, but you're a legend. Thanks ever so much for your time. I appreciate it.**

I will dispute it. Thank you, Paul, for having me. And it's been a pleasure talking to you.