

FIRE FIGHTER

He's the business world's answer to Red Adair – called in to extinguish corporate crises. When it comes to communications, there's not much Michael Bland doesn't know.

Shaun Campbell went to meet the PR maestro

Interviewing communications guru Michael Bland is a bit of a daunting prospect. After all, he knows all the tricks of the journalist's trade. He's written books on the subject. Leading questions, I fear, will get me nowhere. He's unlikely to say something rash to fill the awkward emptiness of the pregnant pause. And he won't fall for the 'elevator question', aka the Columbo cliché, the killer poser you ever so casually drop on your way out.

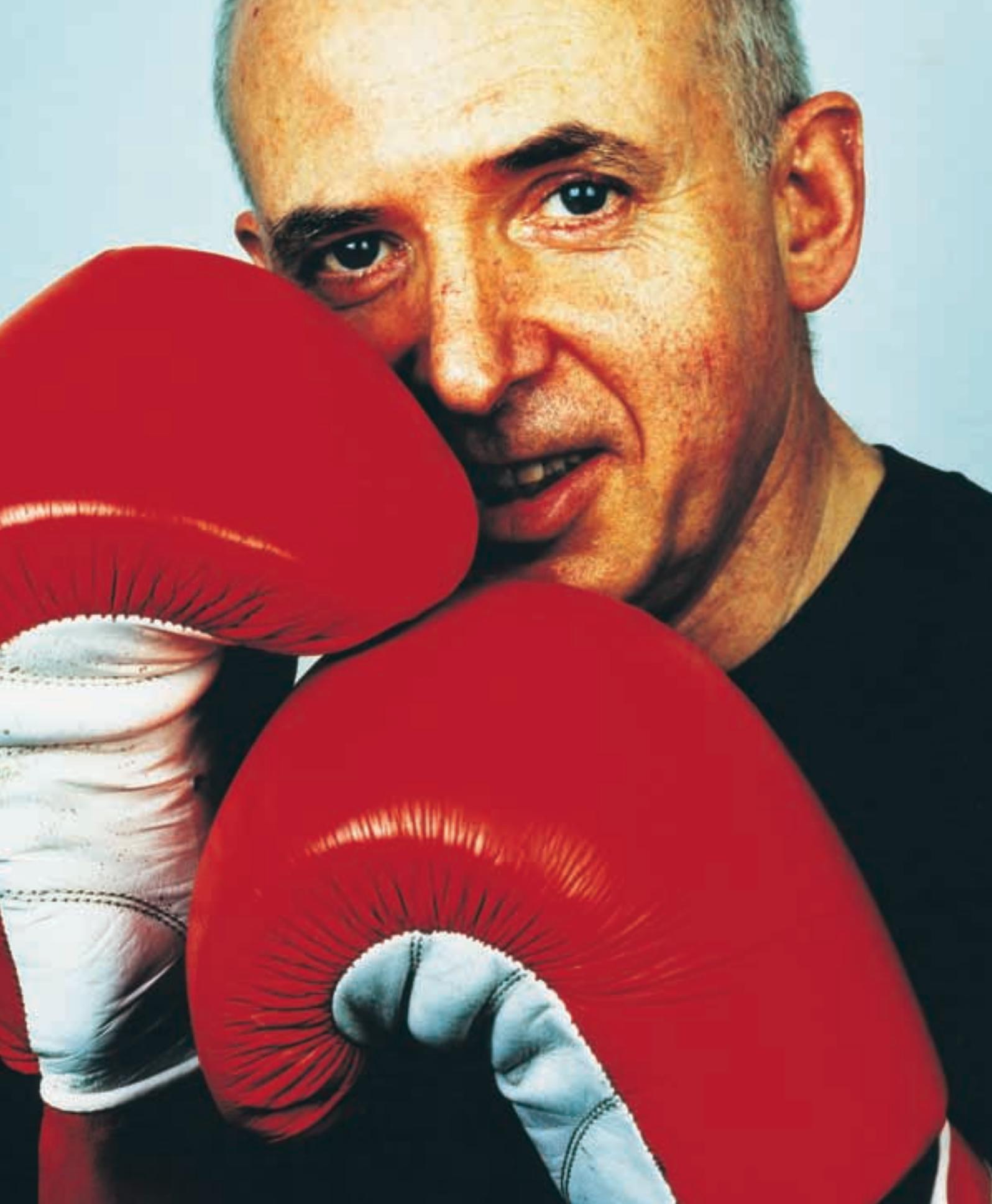
You should also know that he was once an Army winter warfare and survival instructor, and that he's entitled to fasten his kickboxing robes with a black belt. So, yes, all a bit daunting.

Fortunately for me the reality is very different from the mental picture. Dressed ultra casual in black T-shirt and jeans, short, sturdy and looking younger than a man of 62 has a right to, Bland is a welcoming and willing subject for chat and photos. His voice is soft and light, but he talks very quickly, peppering his sentences with an infectious laugh. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease a couple of years ago, and there's a noticeable tremor in his left arm, which, as he points out, disappears the moment he takes up a kickboxing stance for the photographer.

Bland's management consultancy portfolio stretches far and wide, and in some unlikely directions. But if he had to choose a specialist subject for *Mastermind* it would probably be crisis management – how organisations should react and communicate when 'it hits the fan', to pinch the title of one of his recent books. His expertise in damage limitation – turning a crisis into an opportunity is how he prefers to put it – has been widely used. Client confidentiality smothers the names, but his work in this field has ranged from establishing a crisis preparation programme for an international chemical company to training the top managements of Europe's central banks for potential pitfalls in the launch of the Euro.

The first 15 years or so of his CV provide few clues as to how he got there though. His career path has been anything but linear. I ask him to whizz me through his early years in search of a pattern. 'Born in 1944, brought up in Suffolk,' he says. 'My parents divorced when I was quite young so I was brought up in a rather dysfunctional fashion on my own. I had a brother, but he was much older than me. He stayed with our father and later emigrated, so I was effectively an only child. I went to a classic boys' public boarding school, which I hated. ►







BEING THE MEAT
IN THE SANDWICH
BETWEEN HENRY
FORD AND MARGARET
THATCHER MADE
FOR A VERY HIGH-
PRESSURE JOB 

◀ 'I did arts at A-level, but I went to Liverpool University to study dental surgery. It was a family profession, but my motivation was purely money. It didn't work out, I jacked it in after a year. Well, it would be more true to say I was chucked out.' Bland pauses for a laugh at his remembered misdemeanours. 'It would be no big deal today, but the swinging sixties hadn't reached the authorities of Liverpool University,' he says.

ARMED APPRENTICESHIP

From there he went to the Army in 1965, taking a short service commission with the Royal Anglian regiment of infantry. 'I think I managed to serve in the only three years of total peacetime in the history of the British Army,' he says. 'It may sound extraordinary, but when you've done the training you're all geared up to want to go into active service. Now, I look back and think "Thank God, I didn't get shot at", but you feel differently at the time. I was very lucky. I could ski, which not many people could at the time, and that quickly got me selected for winter warfare and survival training.'

Bland enjoyed his three and a bit years in the Army, and acknowledges the lessons he learned from it. 'I think it was excellent,' he says. 'Think about it: you're training people to be willing to be shot at. If you can motivate people to do that, you can motivate people to do anything. And it's very much from the front. There's a total myth about the military commander barking instructions from the rear. I wasn't allowed to take command of my platoon of 30 men until I could show my commanding officer that I knew all about them; their names, their nicknames, whether they were married, everything. In army middle management you have to really know your people, and be able and willing to do everything they have to do. It's real leadership.'

He would have been more than willing to extend his commission, but while the Army was still thinking about it, the offer of a job from the

Reuters press operation landed in his pigeonhole, 'offering three times as much money as the Army'. His aim had been to get into journalism, 'to carry my portable typewriter through war zones around the world', but he had no journalistic experience and the replies to his letters of applications from the newspapers were, as he says, 'pretty short'.

Reuters employed him as a salesman, promoting their newly formed economics services to Europe's leading finance houses. 'I was very lucky at Reuters,' he says. 'After eight months they needed someone to manage their operations in Germany and Austria, and as I spoke German and could manage a piss-up in a brewery, I got the job. I was only 24 and I have to say I wasn't a very good manager. I was very young and naïve, and Reuters was completely unlike the Army. It was very unstructured, everyone running around like headless chickens. But it was great experience, an interesting way to start the learning curve.'

From Reuters he moved briefly – and unsuccessfully – into stockbroking, first with Merrill Lynch in Germany and then returning to England with an old-fashioned London stockbroking house. He describes that experience as horrific. 'The early 1970s were a terrible time to be a stockbroker,' he says. 'It was a massive bear market, nothing was moving. You were paid on commission only, which just meant I was getting more and more into debt. And the firm I was with – well, they really were old farts in red braces. Turn up at 10am, hang around the office for a bit, go for a three-hour lunch. It was the sort of place where you had to have been there for 25 years before you could talk to the boss. I hated it.'

He made ends meet with freelance journalism and feature writing, but now married and with kids on the way, he was looking for something a little more secure. It came in 1974 when he was commissioned by a magazine to interview Jan Hildreth, who had just taken over as director-

general of the Institute of Directors (IoD). 'In those days the IoD was a dozing gentlemen's club in Belgravia, the membership was waning, and Jan was brought in to shake it up. He offered me a job on the management team in the vaguest of capacities. But then his PR consultant convinced him during the course of a long, boozy lunch that the IoD needed a proper, professional in-house PR operation. He decided to put me in charge of that operation, although I didn't even know what PR stood for at the time.'

Bland soon got the hang of it, though. 'We had a lot of success, but it really wasn't that difficult,' he says. 'Jan was determined to put the IoD on the map, and when you've got a figurehead like that who's prepared to put their head above the parapet, the publicity follows.'

MOVING FORD

Next stop was car-making giant Ford, and the title of manager of communications and media. 'It was a much higher salary, but I found that I had finished my work by morning coffee break and I was getting bored,' he says. 'I'd come from an environment where I'd learned a lot about corporate communications and reputation management to an organisation which, in those days, didn't know what corporate image was. I nagged them, said we needed a corporate communications role, and eventually they gave it to me. I never had the title but I had a terrific boss in the PR department and he just said, "If you're so keen, go ahead and do it".'

Bland's feelings about working for Ford during the turbulent days of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the word 'industrial' was inevitably followed by 'dispute', are clearly mixed. 'It was a very exciting time to be around,' he says. 'I used to deal with government relations among other things and being the meat in the sandwich between Henry Ford and Margaret Thatcher made for a very high-pressure job. But there were frustrations. For example, I said we should have a Ford minibus at every one of our plants that could be used ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM SCOTT-HUNTER



CV

Born:

3 March 1944

Education:

Three 'A' levels at Culford School

Completed first year of dental surgery degree at Liverpool University

Career highlights:

1965

Joined the Army on a short

service commission.

Became platoon commander in the Royal Anglian Regiment and then chief instructor in winter survival techniques

1968

Joined Reuters as sales executive

1971

Moved to Merrill Lynch as a

stockbroker, then commodities specialist

1975

Press officer at the Institute of Directors

1978

Joined Ford as manager of communications and government affairs

1986

Managing director of his

own company, Michael Bland Communication Consultancy, providing crisis management and communications training services to international corporations

2006

Published *When it hits the fan*, a book about crisis and issues management



◀ to help local charities. But we didn't have any community relations programmes and we couldn't get a budget to do them. One of the reasons I left was that I couldn't demonstrate that money spent on corporate image and communications would sell more cars in the next six weeks. They couldn't understand that these things are long term and difficult to evaluate.

'In the end the pressure did start to get to me, and I found myself being the mouthpiece for things I didn't really agree with.' I ask him to elaborate, but he's reluctant to go further. 'I'll just say in general that the

American attitude was that our job in Britain was to tell the Government what to do. Because we were Ford we just had to snap our fingers and the Government would dance to our tune. And when they didn't, well, that was our failure. Let me put it this way, as politely as I can: I didn't feel the senior management were sensitive to all the nuances of the job.'

Bland left Ford in 1984 and struck out on his own as a PR and communications consultant with a handy reputation for knowing how to handle a crisis. And he's never looked back.

A cynic might describe crisis

management as the art of putting a good spin on a disaster, or at least bad news. I ask Michael if this is a fair description of what he does. He grimaces, his nose wrinkling in distaste. 'No,' he says finally. 'I really would avoid the word spin. It implies covering up or lying in some way, which is one thing you must never do in a crisis. The easiest, and by far the best thing, is to come clean and tell the entire truth. If you can't do that, for legal reasons or whatever, then tell as much truth as you can.'

'The classic example of getting it wrong is the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. They responded far too slowly, they

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didn't fess up. When the company president was asked at a press conference if he'd seen the damage for himself, he said he was a very busy man and had more important things to do. When he was asked how he felt about the carnage the spill had done to wildlife, he said: "They've only recovered 30,000 bird carcasses. Hell, the American public shoot more ducks on the first day of the hunting season in the Mississippi Delta." Well, those quotes echoed round the world, and they didn't reflect well on the company.

A few weeks later, though, a BP tanker called *American Trader* sunk

when its anchor was dropped incorrectly and caused 375,000 gallons of crude oil to wash up on the beaches of California. Pretty high-profile stuff. But BP did all the right things. They apologised, they compensated, they cleaned up the mess. They ended up being praised by the media and the coastguards for the way they'd handled it.'

SEARCHING FOR POSITIVES

Michael is quick to point out that even the most sensitive, effective PR operation in the world can't be expected to fix everything. 'Railtrack won an award from *PR Week* magazine for the way it handled the Ladbroke Grove disaster,' he says. 'If you do things right the public will forgive one mistake, maybe even two. But if your trains keep crashing... One of the tips I give to press managers is to look for the positives in a crisis. There's usually an opportunity, there's almost no such thing as bad publicity unless your name is Gerald Ratner or, possibly, George Galloway. But I do keep a slot for things like Chernobyl, where no degree of good communications can help. Forget about them. Get your act together, sack a few people, clean up and compensate. Then you can start thinking about long-term rehabilitation of the corporate image.'

'But what I like about crisis management is that it's the one time you've got the management by the short and curlies. Very often, the right thing to do is simply act responsibly. You can sell that as a PR stunt to people who wouldn't normally dream of behaving like that.'

While he's posing for the photographer we chat about some of his other interests – sport, science, faith-healing and a young daughter, Freya, from his second marriage, among the topics. He's competed at thoroughly respectable levels in a number of sports, from skiing to swimming, veteran athletics to his latest passion, kickboxing. Earning his black belt was, he reckons, the hardest thing he's ever undertaken. They're all individual sports, he's not a team player as such, and for him

they're a form of therapy and release from work.

I'm intrigued by his fascination for science and, for want of a better term, the spiritual side of life. 'I've always been interested in the psychic and spiritual,' he says. 'I taught myself to meditate long ago and I've found it hugely beneficial. There's something in faith healing. I don't know quite what, but I've become fascinated by possible scientific explanations so I've started reading up on quantum mechanics and how matter works at microcosmic levels. I haven't got the answers. It's all far too complicated for that. But I keep an open mind.'

He's happy to talk about his Parkinson's and, typically, it's punctuated with plenty of laughs. 'I was giving a talk last year to a group of construction management people on the theme of bomb disposal,' he says. 'I enjoy speaking, but I was quite tense and my left arm started shaking. What I usually do is put my hands on the lectern and stand quiet for a little while and nobody notices. But the lectern was a flimsy little thing and it shook even more. I explained to the audience that I wasn't drunk or unduly nervous, but that I had Parkinson's. This didn't affect my PR skills, I said, but you probably wouldn't want me to defuse an unexploded bomb.'

MORE THAN WORDS

Michael has been around top-level management communications for the best part of 30 years now. How has it changed in that time? Do we do it better now? 'It's certainly changed, and there's a great deal more of it, but I don't know if it's any better,' he says. 'To me, communications is overrated. Some company bosses say it's the single most important thing, but I don't think it is. Success in business is a holistic thing, doing the right things, caring about people. There's far too much reliance on technology today. Powerpoint is the curse of communication, it just gets in the way. Good communication is about story telling, not just allowing people to stare at pretty pictures on a screen.' ■