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Meet the MasterMinds: Al Ries on The Immutable Laws of Branding a Consultancy

Al Ries is a consultant, best-selling author and chairman of Ries & Ries, a marketing firm that specializes in branding strategy. Along with his partner, Laura Ries, Al Ries has consulted with hundreds of companies around the world on key branding issues. His client list includes AT&T, IBM, Intel, Merck, Silicon Graphics, Green Giant and self-help guru Tony Robbins.

He is the author or co-author of nine books, including *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR*, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, *Focus: The Future of Your Company Depends on It* and *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*.

MCNews asked Ries how consultants could brand their practices in today's crowded marketplace.

MCNews: What is your view of the state of marketing and branding among professional service providers, particularly consultants?

Ries: I think that most professional service providers are good at selling, but not at branding. In other words, they do a very good job of rounding up prospects and making presentations to sell their services. On the other hand, they do a lousy job of branding.

To build a brand, you have to stand for something in the mind. BMW stands for "driving," Volvo stands for "safety," Mercedes-Benz stands for "prestige."

But what does the average professional service firm stand for? Nothing. Take the accounting firms: what's the difference between PricewaterhouseCoopers, KPMG, Ernst & Young and Deloitte & Touche? I don't know, and I'll bet most of their prospects have no idea either. They just hire the accounting firm that puts the best team on their accounts.

MCNews: Many consulting firms use advertising to build their brands. Is advertising an effective tool for this? If not, what other branding strategies should consultants consider?

Ries: It can be effective, but not unless it says something that "positions" the firm. PR is generally a more effective branding strategy to establish a position in the mind. After that position is established, then you can switch to advertising to maintain the position.

Safety advertising is effective for Volvo because everybody perceives Volvo to be the safe car. Advertising doesn't have the credibility to put a new idea into the mind. If your advertising says that you are a "terrific consulting firm," who is going to believe it? Everybody says that.

MCNews: What are the two or three keys to success in using public relations to build a brand?

Reis: You need an idea to start with. You need a unique position that you can use to try to get into a prospect's mind. You might, for example, pick out a segment of the market that you are the leader in and then position yourself as the leader in that category.

If you are not the leader in any category, you can try to establish yourself as the "alternative," or the No. 2 brand in the category—as Pepsi-Cola is to Coca-Cola. How do you do that? You ask yourself "what is the leader's position?" and then you become the opposite. Coca-Cola is "the real thing." It's the original cola as a result of its introduction more than a hundred years ago. So Pepsi became the opposite with its strategy to go after teenagers. "The Pepsi Generation."

You need a spokesperson. The best spokesperson is almost always the chief executive. We recommend that the chief executive of any major corporation spend at least half or more of his or her time on outside public relations activities.

MCNews: Some people suggest that publicity is free. Do you agree? If not, what are the major cost categories of a successful public relations program?

Ries: Nothing in life is free. Good publicity requires a lot of time on the part of internal people and sometimes the hiring of expensive PR firms.

The major cost of PR, both internally and externally, is the cost of the people involved. Most of the other expenses are relatively minor.

MCNews: Any tips on how a consultant can get started with a public relations program?

Ries: You need to decide first the scope of the program. There are probably four levels of activity. The smaller firm needs to do it themselves. When the firm gets larger, it can probably afford to hire a freelance PR person on a part-time basis. When the firm gets even larger, it can probably afford to hire a full-time PR person. The next step up the PR ladder is to hire an outside PR firm.

In all cases, a lot of time needs to be spent internally on PR activities. Unlike advertising, you can't delegate all of these activities to an outside agent. The media wants to talk to the source, not the outside mouthpiece.

MCNews: Some consultants struggle with naming their consulting practices. Have you got any advice on what to consider when naming or renaming a consulting business?

Ries: It's a people business, so the first names to consider are those of the people themselves, especially if they are still alive. Even dead, a people name is probably better than any other name. Ernst & Young is a better name than KPMG.

If you are the CEO and your name is lousy, change it. Ralph Lifshitz was a designer who wanted to become a famous designer, so he changed his name to Ralph Lauren.

There are many, many consultants out there with names as bad as Lifshitz, but in my experience they almost never change their names. Tragic.

Faith Plotkin wanted to get famous, so she changed her name to Faith Popcorn and her books and consulting practice have made her famous. [www.faithpopcorn.com/faith/popcorn.htm]

Avoid the bombast name. There are a lot of one-person consultancies out there with names like "Worldwide Global Marketing, Advertising & Sales Consultants." In names, bigger is not necessarily better. Bigger often sounds foolish.

MCNews: If you could give a consultant one piece of marketing advice, what would it be?

Ries: Focus. Whatever you are doing today, your business would be stronger and more profitable in the long run if you concentrated your activities on one industry, one region, one function, or one problem. When you try to be all things to all people, you end up being nothing.

What's a Chevrolet? It's a large, small, cheap, expensive, car or truck. It's also a brand that used to be the leader, but has lost its leadership to Ford.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

Visit www.ries.com to find out more about Ries & Ries, their books and consulting services.