

BY MICHAEL KRAUSS

ED RUSS GETS IT RIGHT

IF YOU WANT to prosper as the economy rebounds, listen to Ed Russ.

Russ is the chief marketing and sales officer in the United States for Grant Thornton International, the global audit, tax and advisory services provider based in Chicago. Russ is a soft-spoken, articulate, fact-based CMO who has quietly helped Grant Thornton grow from a \$367 million firm in 2002 to a \$1.2 billion firm in 2008.

“Studies show companies that invest in brand building during the difficult times emerge from those times with greater market share and higher profitability during the good years,” Russ says.

He joined Grant Thornton in late 2001 on the heels of the dot-com bust, the Enron/Arthur Andersen accounting debacle and the start of Sarbanes-Oxley accounting compliance process. The accounting, tax and advisory services world was in upheaval. There was market share to be gained or lost. Russ and Grant Thornton invested, and the results are impressive.

“Nobody knew who Grant Thornton was,” Russ says. “I conducted an awareness study asking CFOs, ‘If you were in the market for an accounting firm, which firms first come to mind?’ Only 5% said Grant Thornton.

“For the past six years I’ve been attacking that number. We have a good reputation with our clients. If we make more people aware of that reputation, good things are going to happen,” he says.

Russ focused on boosting awareness through an integrated marketing communications and sales effort. He also instituted a client satisfaction program to confirm that Grant Thornton provides superior service.

“I started measuring client satisfaction in 2003 using the Net Promoter approach advocated by Fred Reichheld. The approach measures how likely Grant Thornton clients are to recommend the company on a 10-point scale. It takes the percentage of promoters who rate the company a nine or 10, and subtracts detractors, who rate the company a zero to six, to gain the net promoter score.

“We had a Net Promoter Score of 49%, which confirmed my views. Reichheld’s Net Promoter stars exceed 48%,” Russ says. “We started out pretty good at 49% in 2003. Today, our average Net Promoter Score is 62%.”

While client satisfaction was high, brand familiarity was low. In 2003, only 43% of target buyers rated themselves somewhat to very familiar with Grant Thornton. Scores for competitors like PricewaterhouseCoopers stood at 81%.



Today, thanks to an integrated campaign that includes TV, radio, print and electronic media advertising, brand familiarity is 20% higher at 64%. Grant Thornton isn’t yet a household name, but the brand and the business have made sizable gains.

Russ is highly research-driven. He uses data to drive his advertising development.

“I study and read the data. I’ve concluded the basis for client selection is in four areas: responsive service, providing ideas or recommendations, access to global resources and getting quick answers to technical questions. That’s what our clients are looking for. We’ve created four TV commercials addressing each of those particular client selection criteria,” Russ says.

Russ deploys a high-quality integrated suite of marketing, communications and sales tactics to achieve his results, but the real secret to this marketing success story is the yin and yang of Ed Russ. He is a low-key, collaborative executive who is driven and focused.

His TV ads, produced by Chicago-based Coil Counts Ford & Cheney, blend strategic focus with lightheartedness and humor. That combination of almost self-effacing shyness and focused pursuit of business objectives has paid big dividends for Grant Thornton. It’s also a model other marketers should embrace.

Russ has an unconventional background for a CMO. The Pittsburgh native trained to be an Olympic gymnast and attended Kent State University, where he earned a bachelor’s in psychology, and he also has an M.B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh.

He began his career in operations and supply chain management with BorgWarner

Inc., the auto parts manufacturer and distributor. He designed warehouses that handle more than 10,000 parts. He moved to shop floor design, and then to market research and industrial product development. He did a stint in personnel and wrote job descriptions, which he says gave him “a real overview of the entire business.”

Then the entrepreneurial bug bit. He helped start Rusty Jones, the auto body undercoating and rust-proofing service, as vice president of marketing. When that business was sold, he helped Alberto Culver create Signed, Sealed & Delivered, a services business treating, coating and guaranteeing concrete industrial floors. He was part of the team that started Merchant Network, a venture-backed electronic bill payment provider. He raised \$5.2 million in venture capital and helped sell the company to Intuit.

His success at raising venture capital led Russ to a position as vice president of marketing for an appraisal and valuations organization, American Appraisal Associates, where he learned about marketing and selling to CFOs. From there he was recruited away by PricewaterhouseCoopers to serve as its national director of marketing for the middle market practice.

While at PwC, Russ was part of a team contemplating an acquisition of Grant Thornton. PwC didn’t acquire Grant Thornton, but Grant Thornton did hire Russ. The rest is history.

Russ has two pieces of advice for young marketers: “Do something you really like doing. I don’t care what industry it is in. If your affinity is for cars, consider the automotive industry. It’s having difficulties now, but there are lots of cars out there. If you like where the money is, look at financial services. Financial services are here to stay. Do what you like.

“My second piece of advice is to have empathy. Look at the world through your clients’ eyes. Look at the world through your employees’ eyes. Look at the world through your boss’s eyes,” he adds.

Russ is fond of quoting Amazon founder Jeff Bezos on branding. “Bezos says, ‘Your brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room.’”

In Russ’ case, they say, “There’s an accomplished marketer.” ■



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