

Flying Fearless

Over the past 30 years, Ron Askew has seen it all, from both the brand and agency sides. He is a former chief marketing officer of Coors, where he reinvigorated brand communications, and a vice-president at PepsiCo, where he launched three businesses.

In between, Ron founded The Integer Group, building it into a \$680 million agency, and today he is the chief executive officer of TracyLocke, the agency where he started his career as an intern in the mid-1970s.

We sat down with Ron to get his perspective on the changes he's seen in the marketing business from both sides of the desk over the past three decades, and his thoughts on what will change in the years ahead.

What did you learn when you were on the brand side that you're now applying to your agency world?

I learned that getting the most out of the agency means creating an environment where there's a mutual journey to make the brand better. That creates a dialogue about where the business is going and the obstacles to getting there that need to be addressed.

How about lessons you've learned on the agency side that every CMO ought to know?

The biggest lesson is to be more fearless in the marketplace and make bolder moves. A lot of times,

on the client side, people want to go with smaller iterations rather than transformational ideas.

We're really fortunate to have a number of clients who rally us to be fearless, because they're fearless. I like carrying that message to other clients who aren't quite there.

If you had to pick one thing that an agency needs to succeed, what would that be?

I think it's the relentless pursuit of big ideas. The agency that's thinking about ideas to go into different message portals, if you will — whether in home, out-of-home, or at retail — that's the best quality for an agency to have.

In the end, the relationship is fostered by providing results and solutions, particularly if you come up with solutions in a time of transition or crisis. It really bonds the agency and the client together when you mutually solve something.

Can you give us an example of a big idea?

Kimberly-Clark said they needed a way to sell their family of brands. We came up with a give-away program and then determined how to take that out into marketplace, as opposed to starting with what the idea would look like at retail. It's really about starting with the idea and then finding the best ways to take it across the different communications portals.

Where do you find the ideas?

We've really got everyone focused on thinking about the insights that drive creativity. So, for instance, if someone is coming home and wants a snack, why do they want that snack? It's when you drill down and ask why they want that snack and find out that they are looking for tension release, that's what helps drive the creative. Then, when the customer sees that creative, they say, "That is exactly what I'm looking for."

A look into the clear blue sky with former Coors CMO and current TracyLocke CEO Ron Askew.

Has the nature of that insight changed?

Yes. Instead of having one planning department or strategy group, we now have two. One group focuses on the consumer interacting with the brand as it relates to the overall brand image, and the other is a group of retail strategists who are focused on the retail environment where those brands are marketed and sold.

It's important to know the difference between a Walmart, a Target, a Kroger and a 7-Eleven—the need-states and user groups that tend to gravitate to each of them vary greatly. You might have a more value-conscious consumer going to one outlet, and a more convenience-oriented consumer going to another, for example.

You have to figure out which messages in your brand architecture rise to the top so that you have the most impact in each market. That's where the difference is in the insights. We're now able to customize programs that match what the brand equity is with each retailer and align that to create a better business result.

How do you see the agency business changing in the years ahead?

We'll no longer look at media as compartmentalized. If you talk to the people consuming "new media," they don't look at it as "new media." It's *their* media. It's only those of us in the back, who are dragging our feet, who talk about different kinds of media. That will change.

With the clean-store policies, agencies are also going to have to deliver brand experiences, which used to be brand promotion. Those experiences are going to be executed out-of-home at venues and on the web, digitally. That is how you're going to get value-added promotions and interaction with the brand.

At retail, the difference is that you're going to move away from mass promotions to very targeted promotions designed for a retailer at a specific drive slot, or promotion period. It's going to be very targeted, with very few mass-market events.

Can you measure a brand experience?

In many of our programs we are guiding people to a website where we can capture a whole host of information. First is, how many people went there? In the past, when you ran an ad you weren't sure

how many people even saw it to begin with. We had rough measures to do that, but now, with the ability of a promotion or an in-store event or advertising to actually drive them to a website, we have a lot more metrics than we used to.

Also retailers have begun sharing results with manufacturers, more so than ever before. So, we're able to get more information on how something performed. In some cases we can do that down to the performance by week, and in some cases by day. That wasn't available before. We're now looking at behavior, and not just attitudes.

What advice would you give a young person starting a career in marketing?

They should really be a student of the entire selling process, particularly if they are going into the agency business. They really need an understanding of the different portals of information. Don't concentrate in any one area. Too many times we have young people show up and say that they only want to do TV ads or promotions. You really need to have a broader band of experience going forward.

What is your greatest challenge?

The greatest challenge is to ensure that our people are feeling engaged and that we're coming up with ideas that drive the client's business. The more engaged and excited our people are about being here the more they come up with big ideas. The more that happens the more our clients are satisfied, which leads to longevity in the business.

If I can keep an environment where our employees feel like there is freedom to fail, to be fearless, they have a support mechanism, that they have resources to get insights to do their job—that's going to keep them really excited to come up with great ideas. ■



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