Your Brand Is Your Most Powerful Differentiator

Being an independent agency isn’t the advantage it used to be. There are simply too many choices.

And we can’t differentiate on capabilities anymore either. Most of us offer some combination of strategy, creative, media, production and now AI. And if we don’t have it all (and we’re smart), we have an explanation for how we can scale up when needed.

So what can we do to stand out?

After more than four decades of leading agencies, I have some advice for my fellow founders and agency leaders: Don’t forget to invest in your own brand.

I know it sounds obvious. But I’ve lived through what happens when you let your own brand rest on its laurels because you’re busy building everyone else’s. The result is you end up having to work a lot harder to show people what you’re capable of, because they’ve already formed a perception.

So let’s invest in our brands so they can work for us. That starts by owning your story.

Ours began in 2004, when I led a management buyout to save our agency from disappearing. Our original 40 employees, who we still call the “Brave 40,” believed in what we were building and decided to stay, and they even pooled their own money to buy the sign that would hang above our door.

We were a little agency from Rochester, New York, determined to make the industry see that great ideas can come from

anywhere. We were scrappy and smart, and a little rascally. The kind of agency you never saw coming.

That spirit is still in us, but we've grown up a lot over the last 22 years, too. In 2012, we sold to Project Worldwide to gain the ability to scale, because their Detroit roots matched our grit, and because their independent and employee-owned model allowed us to keep our soul. As we grew, we raised the bar across our business, from the talent we attracted, to our work, and the brands we worked with.

Along the way, our brand stopped keeping up with who we'd become, and it also lost the soul that gave us our start. We needed to reflect the agency we'd become while protecting the equity and reputation we'd built.

Now, here's something that might surprise you: I didn't lead our rebrand.

I've always believed in leading from a place of abundance, and making room for more people and ideas. That means trusting the people around you to see things you might not.

I let go, and the rest of the leadership team led the rebrand with the freedom to challenge everything, including the name on the door.

Keeping my name wasn't part of the brief. In fact, my only request was that they not call us P+N.

The team brought in outside consultants to challenge their thinking and tested the new positioning with search consultants to understand what resonated and what needed work.

One piece of feedback came through over and over: Whatever you're saying, go further. Don't be afraid to be provocative.

It was a good reminder that in an industry where we're all

selling creativity in one way or another, how we tell our own story is our lifeline. We can’t afford to sound like everyone else.

So while many agencies are moving away from founder names in favor of names that describe what they deliver, we went the other direction.

The team chose NAPIER because it represented a mindset and a spirit that had been with us since 2004. That founder who risked everything because she believed in her team, and the people who stuck by her to bring it to life. We’ve always had to outthink, outwork and outshine agencies many times our size. And now we’re owning our roots in a new way, with a simpler name that carries more power.

We also got much clearer about who we’re for. We’re not going after every challenger brand, we’re focused on “sleeping giants”: brands that have strong equity or scale, but aren’t realizing their full potential. These are brands who need to break free from familiar patterns and move differently. It’s what we’ve always done best, but now we have a sharper and more interesting way to articulate it.

On October 22, after 22 years as Partners + Napier, we officially unveiled our new name, visual identity and positioning. It’s been surreal to watch it all come to life, and it’s also proved what I’ve long believed about leading with abundance.

You have to know what makes you special, but you also have to give others room to see possibilities you might not. That’s how you build something that can keep growing beyond you and actually become a legacy.

We are in the business of building brands. We challenge clients to have conviction, to evolve, to get clearer about who they are and to make choices that will set them apart.

We should be willing to do the same.

So to my fellow agency leaders: Don’t wait for a major business disruption to take a fresh look at your brand. And don’t assume that because you know what makes your agency special, everyone else does too.

Give your own brand the attention you’d give your most important client.

And give the people you’ve brought into your business the room to make it even better.

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