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Dale Brown
Brown & Martin, Inc.

Chip Martin
Brown & Martin, Inc.



[COVER STORY]



**ARE YOU
HAVING FUN?**

PUT THE PASSION INTO YOUR BUSINESS

D

ale Brown is the "Brown" of Brown & Martin Inc., a Waukesha-based public relations and marketing firm.

So, who is the "Martin?"

Martin is a dummy. As in Chip Martin. You see, Brown has been a ventriloquist since he was 12 years old, so it was only natural for him to enlist his dummy as his business "partner" and even his trademark.

One of the many philosophies Brown lives by is: Take your work very seriously, but never take yourself too seriously.

Brown, 59, juggles his life as a ventriloquist, small business owner, marketing and public relations guru, amateur racecar driver and all-around family man.

According to Brown, business should be fun.

"This is not a job to me. This is what I do, and what I want to do," Brown said.

For years, corporations have hired Brown to give keynote speeches on topics ranging from goal setting to finding balance in life.

One such performance came about 10 years ago, when Brown and Martin were asked to deliver a surprise address to about 1,000 employees at Johnson Wax, a division of Racine-based S.C. Johnson & Son Inc.

During the performance, which was captured on videotape, Martin immediately won over the audience by playfully poking fun at Sam Johnson, who was chairman of the company at the time.

"And there's Mr. Johnson, chairman," Martin quipped. "You know, Mr. Johnson has a unique way of ending all of his meetings. Yeah. 'All those who agree with my idea, say 'Aye.' All those opposed to my idea, say, 'I resign.'"

As the audience breaks into laughter (including Johnson, who has since passed away), Brown is quick to jump into a conversation with Martin describing the company. Seconds later, Brown is praising the innovations of S.C. Johnson.

"Johnson was one of the first companies to offer their employees paid vacations, profit sharing, pension plans, health and life insurance, and Johnson was and is very concerned about their employees' health and wellness," Brown said.

Through Martin, Brown provides comic relief for his clients.

"The puppets are not held to the same standard as a person, and because of that, they are a great communication tool. They can get away with things that people can't," Brown said. "That is why corporations use us in their settings. It makes a non-typical event or meeting. And when it is non-traditional, (attendees) will tend to remember more of what is said. It becomes a very valuable

tool, and the companies sometimes like them so much, we keep (the puppets) around as mascots at meetings. That is how they started."

Over the past 22 years, Brown has made a lucrative career out of his childhood hobby. And he's having fun doing it.

His puppets are very popular in the custom newsletters Brown & Martin creates for itself and nine other companies. The newsletters are created for

offers its clients with puppets is also reflected in its own office environment.

Almost every Friday at 4 p.m., the Brown & Martin office hosts an internal happy hour. The success of the happy hour when it was in its beginning stages was what made Brown realize that there are other activities the office can do to keep the atmosphere light, yet still keep employees serious about their work.

"We want to make sure that everyone

"WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE ALWAYS UNDERSTANDS THAT WE APPRECIATE WHAT THEY DO"

companies to send to clients, employees or vendors to include information and entertainment.

The fictional characters include Seymour Sales, editor of the newsletter for Society Insurance in Fond du Lac; Ed Hesive, editor for Tailored Label Products Inc., Menomonee Falls; Professor DuLotz, editor for Kohler Engines, Kohler; Mel Metal Forms, editor for Metal Forms Corp., Milwaukee; and Ronnie Road Warrior, editor for Blackhawk Transport Inc., Beloit.

"People only read newsletters for a couple reasons. To learn something or to be entertained," Brown said.

Brown & Martin tries to offer the best of both worlds in the newsletters. The mascots can poke fun at the industry or the company while delivering important information about industry news, company sales or issues the readers should consider.

The humor that Brown & Martin

always understands that we appreciate what they do, and that we don't always have to take ourselves seriously," Brown said. "We make money and we sell time. So when we waste time, we lose money. But I think it is really critical to let the employees know that I don't always care about that. I would rather care that they enjoy their job, and that I appreciate what they do. That is what got us started on all of these dumb things."

Dumb, yet very humorous things include the annual employee rock, paper, scissors contest that has become so competitive that Brown wore a referee shirt last year.

Brown & Martin is also quick to strike down any talk of a person taking themselves too seriously.

"One fellow is sort of a curmudgeon and he always says that all of the holidays are per-

petuated by the card industry and that there is not any real meaning behind it. So we made a special Jim Day where we honored him," Brown said. "It happens to be Flag Day, so we will not forget what day it is. Every Flag Day, we celebrate Jim Day and all the special ways we have to treat him that day. And it is really funny, because we are poking fun at him but at the same time, he gets all of these privileges too."

Jim Day went over so well that there is now a Steve Day, for Steve Borgwardt, who was recently named partner, and a Leslie Day for Leslie Bonk, who is celebrating 20 years as an employee this year.

"It is an opportunity for employees to poke fun at the people they sometimes might curse behind their backs," Brown said.

Brown & Martin's annual holiday party is held at Brown's house. Employees by now are used to walking in the front door and being handed a script and a puppet, where they are then sent to act out the script that they have never seen before in front of a video camera. The funniest part is when the group watches the collective scripts and employees, Brown said.

"I know (the business) is a stressful environment, and I think that one of my obligations as a manager is to try to help relieve as much of that stress as possible," Brown said. "That is the atmosphere of the work environment, and it starts at the top. So, if the boss is always stressed, everybody else will always be stressed."

Working in a stress-relieving environment can have a positive outcome on the client side, as well as the internal culture of the company. When employees are able to relieve stress or work in a less intense environment, they can create a better product and even forge better relationships with clients, Brown said.

"We are in a very stressful business

..... FUN continued on pg. 14

BROWN & MARTIN INC.

LOCATION: 21001 Watertown Road, Waukesha

FOUNDED: 1984

LEADERSHIP: Dale Brown, president

EMPLOYEES: 8

REVENUE:

\$1 million in annual capitalized billings

WEB SITE: www.bmpr.com

because many things have to be done very fast and they have to be done perfectly. We are paid to be perfect. Our clients expect it," Brown said. "A lot of things can go wrong. You have vendors that may drop the ball or deadlines that someone else may have missed. That is going to cause you problems. And we always have to make things perfect."

Brown & Martin's track record speaks to the issue of precision. The company is separated into two divisions, the marketing and public relations side of the business and the information technology (IT) side. Work is split pretty evenly between the two, with each division having its own set of clients.

The IT division designs and programs Web sites for clients. Brown & Martin designed the first Web site for Oak Creek-based Master Lock Co. Companies such as Master Lock and Kohler Engines have enlisted Brown & Martin for marketing and public relations work for more than 20 years.

"I think our employees have a genuine relationship with each other, with the company and with our clients,"

Brown said. "That is real key. I think that comes because that is the way I feel."

Another key factor in creating a fun corporate culture is hiring the right people. According to Brown, competent and confident people are fun to work with and able to poke fun at themselves.

"All companies, I think, these days are pretty competent," Brown said. "So if you have two firms that are equal in what they can do, what would make you choose one or the other would be the people. If you like doing business with one group, that's probably the company you are going to choose, and that is sort of our philosophy. We first prove our competency and then a relationship in most cases just develops between our people and our clients. Many of our clients now have become very close personal friends of mine, and as they move from one company to another, we just go with them."

Brown keeps the same philosophy with his vendors as he hopes to have with his clients. Brown & Martin has had the same attorney, accountant, banker and printer that the company had when it started.

Brown said he has achieved the com-

pany culture and life balance he currently enjoys through many years of trial-and-error and some rude awakenings.

"When we first started the company, I was not prepared for running a company and having the responsibility of managing people and the company and keeping clients satisfied. It can be very stressful," Brown said. "You have to focus on that a lot. But if that is all you focus on, then you are missing out, because you should also be focusing on your family, your community and yourself."

An entrepreneur can easily be consumed by all that the business demands. Brown said he almost had to force himself to understand that he needed to focus on the other parts of his life.

"You are going to take time for those other things, and goals help you do that," Brown said. "Goals force you to segment your life so you can focus on a lot of things. It is possible. And I had to learn the hard way."

Every employee at Brown & Martin is on a time management system, which is goal-setting in small increments, Brown said.

"I don't think we are any better than anybody else. I just think it is a true rela-

tionship where we don't take ourselves too seriously," Brown said. "We take our work very seriously. The things we do are serious. We represent companies where we do things that they sometimes can't do for themselves, so our responsibilities are very serious. But we don't have to take ourselves seriously. And I think our clients really appreciate that."

To explain the importance of humor, Brown refers to a published collection of quotes from one of his idols, puppeteer Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets. The book, *"It's Not Easy Being Green: And Other Things to Consider,"* was edited by Henson's daughter, Cheryl, and published after his death.

Among the quotes are unpublished letters and excerpts from personal notebooks. Something Henson once said about one of his idols, ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his puppet Charlie McCarthy, puts the importance of humor into context for Brown.

Henson said: "Something happened when Edgar Bergen spoke through Charlie. Things were said that couldn't be said by ordinary people. It was a way of looking at ourselves and our world in a fresh perspective."

BROWN IMPLEMENTS SUCCESSION PLAN

Dale Brown, president of Waukesha-based Brown & Martin Inc., does not plan to retire for six years, but he has already implemented a business succession plan to ensure the future of his company.

Brown promoted Steve Borgwardt, general manager of the information technology (IT) division of Brown & Martin, to partner and minority stockholder in the firm. Borgwardt will assume full ownership status in 2012.

The marketing and public relations firm was established in 1984, and many clients have been with the company for 10 to 20 years.

"I wanted to make sure that my employees would have a job when I retire.

That was my first concern," Brown said. "Secondly, I wanted to make sure that we gave them a foundation that they would be able to succeed if I wasn't here."

Brown plans to officially retire from the company in 2012 but stay on staff as a marketing and public relations consultant with larger clients as long as needed by the company.

"I did not really want to deal with (the business succession plan), because I did not want to think about retiring," Brown said.

When Brown retires, the ventriloquist services of Brown & Martin will go with him. However, the company's ability to apply humor in corporate communications will stay, he said.

Borgwardt will obtain company stock over the next six years. When Brown

retires, Borgwardt will buy the rest of the company over a period of time. Brown will give Borgwardt the initial loan to purchase the company.



Brown received assistance from his attorney and his accountant to establish the succession plan.

"I am handing the company over to a friend of the employees, who is their manager, who already knows the company and who they trust, which I think is really key," Brown said. "(The successor) has to be somebody they really respect."

— Elizabeth Geldermann