



Left to right: Chris Robichaud, CEO, PMK BNC; Jeff Straughn, Founder and CEO, Brand Synergy Group; Jean-François Pascal, Corporate Marketing Director, Beiersdorf; Laura Striese, Founding Partner and Vice President, Brand Synergy Group; Angie Kzirian, Director, Brand Marketing and Communications, PMK BNC; and Patrick Hoven, Global Marketing, Consumer Products, Beiersdorf at the NIVEA 100th Anniversary Celebration at The METROPOL in Milan, Italy on May 5, 2011

Challenging Clients

An Interview with Jeff Straughn,
Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Brand Synergy Group

EDITORS' NOTE Jeff Straughn has over 20 years of core marketing experience that includes working for global advertising firms, such as Saatchi & Saatchi and Interpublic Group's Bozell, and 10 years within sports marketing at global powerhouse Octagon. Jeff worked for Jay-Z and Mr. Antonio "L.A." Reid while building a new strategic marketing department for Universal Music Group at Island Def Jam Recordings, and he has become a leader and trendsetter in how brands and artists work together.

COMPANY BRIEF An entertainment based marketing company, Brand Synergy Group (www.brandsynergygroup.com) conceptualizes and executes strategies for brand based clients that are seeking to create new, profitable platforms that resonate and strengthen brand loyalty and consumer enthusiasm.

What did you see in the market that made you feel there was a need for this company?

In the music space, I saw a shift in direction in that brands have begun to play more roles within the music area. That has created the need to have someone who really understands brand marketing, who can communicate to brand entities efficiently and effectively in a language that they understand. Music labels aren't used to the concept that brands are becoming more powerful nor to how they can be better utilized to help promote the artists and offset their budgets.

So I met with a senior executive named Larry Mestel, who has worked with many different record labels and who has created a publishing company called Primary Wave to take advantage of where he saw the industry heading. There was a major shift taking place; labels no longer have the same marketing budgets as in the past and they are becoming more like financial institutions to sign artists. So brands and management and artists collectively are going to hold the keys to how we market artists and their music, thus becoming the future in the music space.

We saw that we had a similar vision, so we launched Brand Synergy Group. I went into business with Larry as a 50/50 partner and together we synergize and use each of our talents and relationships to benefit our clients, and to help me deliver what those clients are looking for within the space.

How broad is the client focus and profile?

It's fairly broad. Primary Wave started as a publishing company and then started bringing in other talent to where they now have a big management firm with more than 43 artists as well as a digital firm, "Bright Shop".

I'm a brand extension for what they're doing and for the relationships they have across the board. Those relationships that Larry and his team have mesh nicely with the relations I've built over the years.

So in many cases, we can reach out directly to artists and their managers to deliver a focused and efficient platform, because we're doing it with half the cost of staffs you might find at other larger shops and we're doing it more quickly because we're direct.

Would you provide examples of the breadth of your work?

When I opened my doors, Beiersdorf and their Nivea brand became one of our first clients. We do a lot of their music searches and identify the right musical talent, as well as the songs and lyrics to integrate into TV commercials. We extend that into some other commercial elements, such as advertorial pieces that are brand extensions of the relationships that we have with various artists beyond just the music we use in the TV spot.

We were brought to Hamburg, Germany – Beiersdorf's headquarters – and given a massive global assignment to help them celebrate 100 years of Nivea, the oldest and longest running skincare brand in the world. They wanted to refresh things and send a strong message to the market.

We have a patented program that we call BAM – Brand Alignment Matrix. It's a methodical process that on an X access, we have all the brand attributes, and on the other side, information on all the artists in the industry along with their works and property. We are able match the two up and see where the strongest alignment would result. This forms a basis from which to come up with a strategy that will align artists with the brand's desired direction.

We ended up going through months of that process, which identified Rihanna as having that alignment with Nivea. We were charged with identifying not only the artist, but also with developing the strategy around the artist. Working with the client's agency, the strategy we helped developed was Skin to Skin.

Rihanna has beautiful skin and Nivea has a 100-year history of helping keep skin beautiful, so they merge well. By using Rihanna as one of the main thrusts of Nivea's push into the next 100 years, we're enhancing their contemporary appeal and their relevance through the power of digital social media.

So when we signed with Rihanna, she probably had fewer than 16 million followers on Facebook; today, she has upwards of 45 million. We benefitted from all that through a lot of different touch points we created through this 12-month relationship. For instance, we had exclusive photos from her birthday party and we gave her a link on her Facebook page so that her followers linked from her page to Nivea's where we were able to show that inside access to her birthday party.

We did it for 22 different Facebook pages that are controlled globally by Nivea. Their Facebook page at that time had about 30,000 followers; within the first week, it had increased to more than 70,000. Today, we're up to half a million followers with the majority of them coming through the tangible programs we tapped into through Rihanna.

In many of these areas, is it challenging to put clear metrics in place?

Trying to quantify what the metrics are is a big challenge. But you have to have the discipline to work with your client and identify how she will measure return on investment so you can focus and write your objectives against that.

In Nivea's case, we were able to do that effectively. But it all depends on the brand's objectives. In some cases it might be building impressions or sales, and in others, creating excitement about a specific event.

So while the metrics may vary, we feel that BAM gives us a point of differentiation when we speak to brands because a lot of the marketing they do is outside of music. So BAM correlates our strategy to similar programs they run within their more traditional advertising.

What are you focused on to make sure the business continues to grow?

I always look to innovate and develop things that haven't been tried before that can set my clients apart from everyone else. I like to challenge my clients. There are a few new projects we're working on with clients that, if all goes well, will be game-changers in this space. ●