

Georgia's Business #426

Guest: Jerry Wilson – Senior Vice President, The Coca-Cola Company

Richard Warner: Welcome, I'm Richard Warner, on Georgia's Business this week as unemployment inches toward double digits, thousands of Georgians are face with the real prospect of losing their jobs or the immediate need to find a new one. In this environment how do you do that? For advice we turn to the world's most valuable brand Coca-Cola and one of their senior executives, Jerry Wilson who's new book is all about creating a brand that is you that in fact is the name of the book, 'Managing Brand You', which is out now. Brand Jerry, brand Jerry's got a new title, what is that title?

Jerry Wilson: Well brand Jerry is now chief customer commercial officer of the Coca-Cola Company.

Richard Warner: And so this helps define who you are, what is that brand? What does it mean?

Jerry Wilson: Well, this brand is all about being relevant to our customers and to figure how to bring great consumer relevance and commercialize those ideas with them. Be great partners, and insure we're building our brand but at the same time differentiating their brands in the market place.

Richard Warner: Okay, you see how he did that, it was like we were on the elevator and we had three floors and you summed it up. I would imagine that an individual who's unemployed, underemployed or just unhappy in what their doing, needs to be able to say that same thing.

Jerry Wilson: Well I think so and you know this is a very troubling time in our economy, financially; many great people are losing their jobs, last year two and a half million people, and Georgia's over eight percent unemployment now. And so everyone needs a plan, everyone. And it's no longer just the performance issues, companies are downsizing so there are great people that are right now in the market place reconsidering their own future.

Richard Warner: I'm wondering, have you ever been fired?

Jerry Wilson: No, not yet.

Richard Warner: Well it is a life changing, so many people tell you when it happens it is the best thing that could possible happen to you. Maybe not in this environment but it can force you to create your brand. Maybe you ought to tell what that is. What is a brand of a person?

Jerry Wilson: Well, a brand, first off the idea of managing brand you really came from working in thirty years from consumer brands. The question that I was thinking about is what if I were to take some of the principles of brand development and put them to work for us as people. And so a brand, think of a brand, Richard as a promise plus the experience that creates a relationship with target consumers. That's a simple equation.

Richard Warner: So I know when I walk into a McDonald's which has been your core customer for Coke, you ran the McDonald's account, critical, when you walk into a McDonald's in Albany, GA, you're going to have the same experience as if you walk into one in California.

Jerry Wilson: Well McDonald's is a world class leading brand and the promise is pretty simple. Great food served fast by friendly people, high quality for a good value in a friendly environment. When that occurs the relationship with the consumer grows. When that doesn't, obviously it drops and we as people have the same issues. What are the promises we make in our job or at home and do we actually keep those?

Richard Warner: I'm advertising for an account executive right now and naturally the flood gates have opened there are some amazing people out there, amazing skills and yet when it comes time to differentiating any one from the other, all the objectives are the same, you're looking at the same basic types of experience, at least the way it's formatted. How do you break out of that box?

Jerry Wilson: Well as an applicant, we really need think about differentiating and standing out in a way that is meaningful to you as the hiring manager. So everyone has a job description but the question is how you expand that job description to really play in to creating a value with an employer. So as an account executive you have basic skills, learning how to work with clients, learning how to sell different programming, learning how to then collect on those programming obligations. But what if you had an account executive that was client elation? That they were going to learn so much about their clients that they wanted to do more business with you, not selling but actually creating a magnet into your firm. That's the kind of person, I think you'd be looking for versus a generic account executive.

Richard Warner: And I'm going to take that elation client, uh account manger and put it over here and continue to look through the rest of the stack. What else goes into it besides that positioning statement? There's really a whole lot behind that, that's forcing you to think about who you are and what you want.

Jerry Wilson: Right, well positioning is one of the science ideas that my co-author Ira Bloominghall and I bring out in this book. Positioning is something consumer products firms use very well. And it is a specific statement about the space the brand will occupy. It includes the target audience, the frame of reference, your competitive advantage and those proof points that would show that you're actually going to delivery against those. So an example the account executive comes in to apply for the job and their positioning

statement to you, Richard the hiring manager, I, Jane Smith, am a client elation leader who has not only delivered great client experiences in other firms but has helped my previous employer to be named the advertiser of the year with my clients. That kind of thing and that positioning statement then is delivered in the actual way they come across in their interview the way that they position themselves.

Richard Warner: Now, I'm into that, I'm going to bring that person back for a second interview, the client elation person. But they have to deliver on it. I mean it's more than just a branding statement that gets you in the door.

Jerry Wilson: Well that's a huge point and the worst thing that someone could do is over promise and under deliver. Because one thing that great brands recognize is that everything communicates. So let's take an example of a recent college graduate who's just entered the work force and they come in with the big degree and the credentials and they want to be seen as an upwardly mobile executive that has great career pathing within their company. But they're late to meetings, they don't come prepared, they're not ready to actually contribute to the meetings, so their brand image is very different than their brand identity they want to project.

Richard Warner: So that's after the fact servicing what you sell. How about before the fact because alot of the book talks about the exercise use an individual need to go through in determining, I mean really what is that but who are you?

Jerry Wilson: Well that's right and this first off we begin by kind of unselling a little bit of the idea. This is not about dress for success, it's not about copy cat marketing and it's not certainly trying to create a self promotion campaign. Obviously that becomes later on an important part of how you think. But it begins with the brand you audit. And the audit is step one to step back and think about your entire life to date and you ask questions what happened in your childhood, what happened in your teenage and college years, what happened as a young adult. Because we're a function of everything that's happened to us life to date. Those experiences not only craft how we interrelate with others but how we even accept challenges, how we portray ourselves to the public and also to friends.

Richard Warner: Interesting you mentioned high school, in my case it was grade school. How could that thing that happened that long ago have such an impact on who are now, maybe it is something you're trying to escape or something that was painful or whatever letting that go.

Jerry Wilson: Well, you know there are five life phases that managing brand takes the reader through. They are very short because early on..

Richard Warner: until you hit thirty..

Jerry Wilson: Exactly then you got the longest period which is all about adaptation.

Richard Warner: Well we'll get to that because that's worth spending some time on, but prior to age thirty..

Jerry Wilson: Well let's imagine that there's a tenth grade French class that you're attending..

Richard Warner: that would be a fifth grade French class

Jerry Wilson: Okay we're all the way back in the fifth grade, something happened in your elementary school, you were involved in a class and the teacher made fun of you because of the way...

Richard Warner: We're you there? That's exactly what it was, it was fifth grade French class, and it was awful.

Jerry Wilson: ..and what happened is that begins how to tarnish how you think about your self image, you take that with and you begin to wonder can I speak in public, can I do this can I do that? And it becomes a limiting factor. The brand audit allows to go ahead and face that, take the life learning from it and move forward.

Richard Warner: There's a process that goes into besides confronting whatever issues happened to you good or bad, primarily bad because those are the ones that really define you that you own. You have to go through the process of getting some outside feedback on who you really are. You may think you're somebody but you need to go through the exercise of really finding out.

Jerry Wilson: Right, well during the brand audit section of the book, we actually talk about Maya Angelou and her entire life story which is so compelling. To see what she's been able to do from her childhood all the way to a well respected adult. It's a great empowering story for all of us. But the image is what you're referring to and this idea of the image is the total perception that others have of us, as people. And sometimes we think we have an identity, but the image is very different and that is why important to get an outside/in perspective of who are.

Richard Warner: The identity is what we think we are, the image is what others think of us and there is probably going to be a disconnect to a small or large degree for everybody.

Jerry Wilson: Well there can be. Certainly the goal would be that your identity is very consistent with your image.

Richard Warner: So how do you find out?

Jerry Wilson: Well first is to do that reflection and the first two steps is to go ahead and find out where you stand today. You can do that by talking with friends, you can do that through certain companies do a 360 degree feedback which is very effective in getting

anonymous feedback or you can even go on some websites that help you determine your own personality and how you think about situations.

Richard Warner: Would that mean that somebody who is just whacked need to go back to the company that they came from and solicit subjective feedback on themselves?

Jerry Wilson: Well anyone that has been apart of a downsizing probably has great friends that still remain at that company. It would be a great idea and go back to them and go into a little bit of investigation with them and say you know now I am going to be looking for a new career, how do you think I was perceived at my prior company?

Richard Warner: Well and as you say in the book, there's actually a list, you have to be more specific than that.

Jerry Wilson: That's right, yeah, the idea would be to get more into your own situation. Managing brand you lets you self create the process using a standard approach. So this is self led and you can do that by talking with people you can ask open ended questions or you can go in with a specific set of questions. How do you think management saw me at my former company? How do you think our customers thought of me at my former company? Etc..

Richard Warner: Human nature I'm going to say but you don't understand that's not what I was doing.

Jerry Wilson: Well I think that's where you have to go in with a Teflon coat because if you're asking for honest feed back and you actually get it, people say well you know people might have thought of you in this one light different then you may have determined that you were referred to. You know that's a great help for someone looking for a new career. It may help them actually swing into a different area. You know it's interesting today is that with 2.5 million people unemployed and another million so far this year, combine that with the fact that over fifty percent of people state in surveys their either somewhat or completely dissatisfied with their job. So the idea would be to learn about yourself in these first two phases and then let the next five propel you to the intersection of passion and skills. And then you can go into an area that is much more fulfilling.

Richard Warner: I mentioned age thirty-one as where you put the delineation the most important thing is that you get to that stage of your life, which is really the core professional years. Personally as if you're not professional, adaptation which means what?

Jerry Wilson: Well many people begin to think in their forties, fifties and sixties especially, not so much in the thirties that their already at a phase where their destiny is already created. That they can't go into a different field and you know we're living much

older than we ever have, we're living much healthier than we have and so the idea of having a plan into you eighties, nineties and beyond is a realistic situation. However, life throws a lot of curve balls at us, whether it's health issues, whether it's being relocated to a fresh city, whether it's career issues and the real successful people are the ones who step back and instead of fighting what's happening play into it adapt to the situation and come out of it even stronger.

Richard Warner: We had George Isreal who is the head of the Georgia Chamber of Commerce sitting in that chair one week when Brown and Williamson Tobacco announced they were going to close their facility in Macon. Now this was a major high paying employer in central Georgia, one of the few- it happened that morning. So I asked George, he had been the mayor of Macon, what's your message to these people? And he said you got to adapt, it's so hard to do.

Jerry Wilson: It's very hard. There's an emotional reality that goes along with that type of an announcement. So allowing people to go through and deal with that emotionally first and then begin to say, okay I've got a chance to build my own life plan, let's get on with it.

Richard Warner: Your life plan, you were with Volkswagen, for many years, responsible for US territory, reporting back to corporate in Germany, and I'm interested in the transition from Volkswagen to Coke- how did that happen? Was it planned? Was it something you wanted? Did you have to go seek it or what?

Jerry Wilson: Well I had such a great career with Volkswagen of America and was able to progress through many different opportunities. I joined the company as a distribution analyst and left as a brand manager for the US. I was really fortunate to be able to learn much about the franchising business, to learn about brand development and to learn about Volkswagen, Porsche, and Audi which are great world class brands. I was actually considering moving to another automobile company at the time yet Coca-Cola came along and it was a terrific, terrific opportunity to go from a great respected niche company in the automobile business to a cultural, global two hundred country iconic brand. But you know what's interesting, when I did that I took a significant step back in my career.

Richard Warner: How?

Jerry Wilson: I went from a brand manager of the US to an entry-level account executive within the Coca-Cola Company. I did that strategically knowing full well that I was going to be rebuilding my brand within Coke an opportunity came in central Florida to go down and become an area account executive. I took it, worked with our regional customers in that market and one thing led to another and here twenty years later, you know I am leading our customers in commercial strategy.

Richard Warner: Were you married and had kids at the time?

Jerry Wilson: Great question. Married to my best friend Jenny and we have a six month old baby, Abbie who is now...

Richard Warner: Something I got to tell you good news and bad news, do you like Florida?

Jerry Wilson: And she was very supportive and still is, I couldn't be here without her support.

Richard Warner: I'm very interested in that, that took guts and foresight and confidence.

Jerry Wilson: Well it did and you know we, it was during a time where when we were in similar economic turmoil. Our house stayed on the market for over fourteen months here, we were living in Orlando in a small little town house...

Richard Warner: Is this like the early nineties?

Jerry Wilson: Yep, twenty years ago and so we really stepped back, we trenched in our life a little bit as far as the you know the financial end goes. But you know it has been the best decision I've ever made. You know I use the analogy, I was on top of a mountain but saw a bigger mountain, so I had to come down to base camp and recomb.

Richard Warner: Within the world's greatest brand, you have to have a brand in order to move up the food chain, which clearly you've done. Now you're at the bottom of that much bigger mountain, what's the strategy for creating the brand among your superiors to help you move up?

Jerry Wilson: Well the first thing I had to do was learn a new industry. Certainly going from the automobile industry, working with automobile dealers to go to the Coca-Cola Company working with customers, I had to really become proficient. It goes back to that promise, I had to make sure that I was delivering against those customers in central Florida the Coca-Cola experience they expected. And it started right there.

Richard Warner: So how did you, does that mean you're listening to customers tell you and you're providing that feedback up the food chain?

Jerry Wilson: Absolutely, I mean it began as simply as looking at the customer list, finding out those important customers and going out and meeting with them and seeing how is Coca-Cola doing with your business. How are we adding value? Are there opportunities we can be more integrated?
It was a questioning session.

Richard Warner: So the most important skill is listening?

Jerry Wilson: It was very important. And still is, absolutely.

Richard Warner: You're moving beyond the company's primary representative, the McDonalds' account. Now you don't have to be a genius to figure out that McDonalds is a big deal to Coca- Cola and probably vice-versa. The skill sets that you found yourself being tapped most often in that job, what were they?

Jerry Wilson: Well, for the last several years, I've been president of our global McDonald's division and I have learned so much working with another iconic great brand McDonald's. McDonald's operates in 118 countries and over 31,000 restaurants serving 58 million consumers a day. So the first thing that is important to McDonald's is making sure that brand experience is delivered to their consumers. In fact they think of their consumers as the boss. So everything we do begins with the consumer and comes back. But clearly I had to build a global reputation, working with Europe, Eurasia, Middle East and Africa as well as Canada, Latin America and our Asia Pacific business. So the cultural realities of different parts of the world under a brand positioned the same by and large all around the world.

Richard Warner: This again plays again into the basic part of the book which is that your entire career builds on everything and I would imagine another message is even the moves that you have made that seemingly didn't have a whole lot of value at the time could become very important later.

Jerry Wilson: Oh you better believe it. Some of the most important moves I've made with Coca- Cola have been lateral positions. To move where it wasn't even a promotion but it was an opportunity to develop broader skills. And whether if that was director of strategic planning or whether I was director of strategic marketing, you know I moved into those roles without batting an eye because it was a chance to grow and develop more skills. I loved it and I have taken all of that with me through out my career.

Richard Warner: Do you think that you're trumpeting your accomplishments, there was a phrase in the book that said people tend to want to draw attention to themselves and all that their accomplishing, it doesn't sound like that's how you work.

Jerry Wilson: Well, I think that is a flawed idea. Because if you're just self promoting, then there is a very narrow foundation. And the idea is how do you build a strong foundation? And that becomes you're catapult to success. You know we build credentials with people in organizations as reliable, dependable or not dependable. Do you deliver on your expectations? And we're really seeing one thing that is positive today is kind of a retro active values period where honesty, transparency, thriftiness, it's coming back. And those are all wonderful skills for anybody today, especially in business.

Richard Warner: Transparency is my favorite word; it's that good to great word. Does the Coca- Cola Company embrace transparency, a company that big and full of so many personalities?

Jerry Wilson: Big time. I mean Coca-Cola is a multi cultural brand; it's the most unassuming brand in the world. If you think about the number of people over a billion

two consumers will have a Coke today somewhere in the world a product of our company. And it's accessible to everyone and we know that our strength is just a moment of simple refreshment and to be apart of that moment around the world. But yes, in fact as I was writing the book, the chairman of the board, Neville Isdell was very supportive of this as Muhtar Kent. In fact Neville is one of the testimonies on the book. So there it's great to work in an environment that not only believes in people but allows this kind of an idea to come through with my career.

Richard Warner: Mr. Isdell and Mr. Kent, the personality the professional characteristics the brands that those two gentlemen are, how would you describe the characteristics that got them to where they got.

Jerry Wilson: Well they're both very intelligent individuals. They study the business hard. They take our consumers and customers seriously and they are very well respected. They're people people, they believe that Coca-Cola is owned by our consumers and they really make it a point not only understand how we can win but they also want to hear from the employees ideas of how to grow. They're a great team; they have been a great team for many many years. They actually work together in Eastern Europe and have a comradery that is spectacular.

Richard Warner: Now that is an amazing company, when you walk through the halls there, the multi national flavor that's right here in Georgia. Are you having fun?

Jerry Wilson: I love what I do, some of most enjoyable days have been weather I'm in Singapore or Hong Kong or Macon is being in a McDonald's restaurant with the crew, behind the counter, serving Cokes through the drive through window and seeing how consumers interact with what we stand for. You know there are so many jobs out there that are taken for granted that are very hard jobs to do. Working in a restaurant is a very challenging environment with the complicated point of sales systems, the very complex menus, the made for you order systems and people take these kind of jobs for granted, but I'll tell you, these are some great ambassadors.

Richard Warner: It helps to be on the front line, that is one of the things UPS requires of everybody from the Chairman on down is to spend time once a year on the front lines. And yet looking at and listening to you, Jerry it sounds like you're career has been straight up with the exception of that one mountain to the other. I mean have you feel like you have had setbacks that you have had to overcome?

Jerry Wilson: Well I think we all have setbacks in our career, this is not some linear path it's up, down, sideways, backwards it's just you know especially when you work with a company as I have for twenty years. There I have been times where I have worked in situations where I knew I could be contributing more to the company but I had to stay focused on that exact role and deliver against that. There have times where I have been challenged by the customer, very hard to bring creative solutions to their business and trying to get our company to do that. I've always got great support but listen, business is challenging. It's not just a rollercoaster ride to the finish line.

Richard Warner: You almost have to rewind that, and listen to that, because hidden beneath the way he said it was, was all of us are having to deal with. The book is called *Managing Brand You*, is this an Amazon book?

Jerry Wilson: Yes its Amacom, is the publisher, American Management Association, it's available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Borders..

Richard Warner: Good read

Jerry Wilson: Thank You.

Richard Warner: Jerry Wilson, good guest thanks for being with us.

Jerry Wilson: My pleasure Richard, thank you.

Richard Warner: And thank you for watching, you can catch a replay of this show in Atlanta, on the radio on WCFO that's 1160 AM, you can also listen in on iTunes just do a search on Georgia's Business and you can also sound off to me directly at RichardWarner.com. And now for all of us Georgia Public Broadcasting, I'm Richard Warner and until next week, don't sell yourself short.