Branding Humanity

For Antonio and Paris Buchanan, the family business isn't merely a success because of their firm's unique ability to connect clients with consumers – it's also about their special connection with each other.

As palpable grounding to their global, eponymous Antonio & Paris brand innovation studio, the dynamic of the husband and wife co-CEOs echoes the tenets of creating lasting relationships.

"I've always said that my strengths are his weaknesses, and his weaknesses are my strengths; at work, for the most part, we both know our goals and stay in our lanes," says Paris Buchanan from the couple's San Francisco base. "And, personally, we have a rule at home that when our shoes aren't on, we don't talk about work."



Antonio and Paris Buchanan

Antonio & Paris creates "a love affair" between brands and consumers.

As Chief Strategic Officer, Antonio handles company game-planning, while Paris, as Chief Creative Officer, oversees the firm's right-brained side.

"Our core competencies are different, so it's rare that we're stepping on each other," Antonio Buchanan says. "And being a married couple it's something we've actually tried to downplay. But, we've received feedback from our own consultant, telling us, 'You don't understand: the clients love the chemistry that you're not only partners in business, but partners in life.'"

The partnership has forged a philosophy extending directly to a bond with the manifold brands the company (antonioandparis.com) represents, along with the proprietary methods used to achieve customer-connections for its clientele since being founded in 2003.

"After we sold our previous company and founded A&P, we started looking at the way we connect with consumers," Paris says. "And, there are your traditional focus groups and the traditional ethnographies – but there was something missing; the concepts hadn't really evolved much at all in the past 50 years."

The evolution in approach reveals a backdrop that involves a cache of strategies which belie conventional thinking.

"Typically, what you see about 80 percent of the time in the marketplace is based on the practical things that a brand offers to consumers, which results in a one-way conversation," Antonio explains. "Brands will talk about what they offer, the features, the benefits and all that stuff – but they do so without having any knowledge of what the emotional benefit is going to be to the consumer. That's what really builds great brands, when the consumer gets more out of it, from an emotional perspective. And that's what we do -- try to find that intersection of practical and emotional. That's how brands win."

Winning comes as a result of uniquely "injecting humanity" into brands. Clients such as AT&T, Ten-

et Healthcare, Barco/Cinionic and MINI Cooper example A&P's aims to create a "love affair between brands and their consumers."

"Typically, clients look at their target audience, and define as much by age, income, hobbies," Antonio says. "Through one of our tools, 'Project: Follow-Me,' we incorporate video diaries in which we ask consumers on a daily basis to complete an assignment. Something such as, 'When you shop for a car, what are you looking for?' But then we ask deeper questions, for example, 'What's important to you?' or, 'Do you see yourself as a conformist or a rebel'?"

The results of peeling back layers beyond traditional focus groups elicits some remarkable results.

"What we found was that it had nothing to do with age, nothing to do with income or ethnicity – it had to do with a very specific mindset, what we call the 'Creative Class' of people," Antonio says. "These are individuals who may be a target audience because they're a Millennial who drives a MINI because they think it's cool, or, a Baby Boomer who always drove a Mercedes but now wanted to car which expressed their independence; that's the rebel."

Another research tool, "Voices Across the World," aims for understanding via a method of documentary-driven anthropological content.

"It involves taking a documentary film crew around the country and ranges from chatting with people at, say, parks, or barber shops to even staying with them for days and simply observing them and how they live," Paris says.

A swath of understanding varied clientele and consumers starts at home. By segueing to a virtual model of staffing and workplace in recent years, Antonio & Paris not only had the foresight of remote business, but, moreover, has embraced a truly global company culture. Along with domestic employee bases coast-to-coast, A&P is also represented in Amsterdam, Paris, Panama City, Sydney, Shanghai and Manilla.

"For me, how can I talk to clients about consumers around the globe if everybody in my company is the same ethnicity and comes from the same culture?" Antonio says. "It's a business decision for us – understanding different countries and cultures and backgrounds -- it's really the fabric of who we are and the power of what we bring."

Presenting a global spectrum of insights comes from an experiential drive to variegate perspectives.

"I've worked at two of the world's largest ad agencies; under both circumstances, I was one of the few people of color in a senior position," Antonio says. "When you look around at corporations at top positions, typically, people of color in those positions are Head of Diversity or Head of HR; which is extremely important but typically not in revenue-generating positions; they're not, generally, in revenue-generating positions. Now, we're finally starting to see a meaningful transition in diversity for key positions, as it's more critical than ever."

While the word "diversity" is flexibly used across both business and culture, A&P practices what it preaches.

"Our group of people – not only ethnically, but culturally – puts us in a position to look at our work through the lens of being global citizens," Antonio adds. "For us, we want to work with extremely-talented people that can bring these diverse backgrounds. In our weekly Zoom meetings with our team around the world, it's like the United Nations; it's pretty cool."

Self-experience and personal reflection further denotes the A&P client roll, as health and senior care represent a distinct portion of the company's clients.

"I love the variety of clients we work with," Paris says. "Because of personal health-related experiences with our own parents, we found to desire to change the hospital experience. And today, probably 20 percent of what we do is with health care clients."

For the Buchanans, kinship at home translates to passing the baton at work.

"When you come up with a great strategy, you can then translate it creatively," Paris says.

From conjoining clients and consumers, to their own coupling, A&P deftly and successfully navigates both worlds. "You can't fall in love with somebody if you don't know who they are," Antonio concludes. ***— By Judd Spicer, California Business Journal.***

Copyright © 2020 California Business Journal. All Rights Reserved.