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Top CMOs willing to pay for simplicity

By **Rachel Tobin Ramos**
STAFF WRITER

From the 18th floor of his office in a Buckhead high-rise, Rick Smith looks down on the tangle of highways and overpasses that ferry Atlanta's movers and shakers.

From his vantage point, the roads look clean and simple.

In much the same way, Smith is using his bird's-eye expertise to help chief marketing officers from top Fortune 500 companies see their complicated field from a new, simplified angle.

Serving as a master networker, Smith has created an exclusive club of 50 chief marketing officers who pay \$50,000 each to attend exclusive summits twice a year and several regional meetings.

Called the Marketing 50, Smith is hooking up the top marketing minds from noncompetitive industries and helping them find simple solutions to their marketing problems. Members of the powerful group — which represents more than \$1 trillion in combined market capitalization — exchange cell phone numbers, marketing experiences, and most importantly, says one participant, ideas.

"It was real clear it was a very unique club," said Judy Verses, CMO of Verizon Communications Inc. (NYSE: VZ) "Here in one room I would have 49 of the top marketing minds in the country who have worked through this business through the years and have dealt with these issues on a real-time basis. It's almost like peer-to-peer consulting with some of the best and brightest from the marketing world. It's invaluable."

The fee, she explained, is quite low compared with hiring consultants.

Another member, Chuck Fruit, CMO of The Coca-Cola Co. (NYSE: KO), said, "M50 provides me an opportunity to

broaden my perspective beyond beverages by interacting with marketing leaders across different industries and locations. I am able to learn about real case studies by discussing them with the individuals who were actually involved and discuss general marketing issues with other CMOs."

The Marketing 50 is similar to the G100, which connects the chiefs from the 100 top U.S. multinational companies, and was created by executive recruiting firm Spencer Stuart, Smith's former employer.

Atlanta also has its own version. Ken Bernhardt, chairman of the marketing department at Georgia State University's J. Mack Robinson College of Business, started his Marketing RoundTable 15 years ago. Now with members from 28 companies and organizations, dues are \$6,000 per year, and benefits are professional development and power networking.

"Senior marketing people have just as much need for professional development as junior people, but they have virtually no opportunities to get that," Bernhardt said. "Members can learn things going on in other industries that might be applicable to their industry, and their competitors don't know about this, giving them a competitive advantage."

Smith, 38, also a former marketer, admits that he's created a party that he would never be invited to.

His member roster is impressive. It includes Atlanta's The Home Depot Inc. (NYSE: HD), plus Eastman Kodak Co. (NYSE: EK), Best Buy Co. (NYSE: BBY), General Electric Co. (NYSE: GE) and Marriott International Inc. (NYSE: MAR), to name a few.

Like many entrepreneurs, Smith's brainchild started from a seed that was fertilized by adversity.

He had just finished a book tour supporting an internationally best-selling career book he co-wrote for Spencer Stuart



BYRON E. SMALL

Master networker: Rick Smith helps top marketers meet and find solutions to their marketing problems.

("The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers: The Guide for Achieving Success and Satisfaction"), when the company's CEO essentially fired him.

The company, he was told, wasn't really in the book publishing business. They wished him well.

Smith, a mild-mannered, Southern-reared gentleman who grew up in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, was armed with a head full of ideas and a few contacts from his years in recruiting.

He started tossing around the idea of creating "the most influential business networks in the world," he said — the **World 50 Group**. So he held an advisory meeting in New York, and after getting great feedback, made a few cold calls to the right CMOs.

First, was Carl Gustin Jr. at Kodak. Smith says he sent Gustin a six-page presentation, expecting to hear back weeks later, if at all. Within the hour, Gustin had replied in an e-

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mail that it was a great idea and asked where he could sign up.

"I was in shock," Smith said.

Within a few weeks he had netted 15 top CMOs by going down a list of the most valuable brands in the world.

After being called by a corporate accounting office to send an invoice, Smith said he had to run out and order stationery to print his first invoice — essentially starting the organization with an investment of \$400.

His initial 15 members grew to 50, selling out within six months.

Last October, he held the group's first meeting in an estate on the upper east side of Manhattan.

Famous movie- and wine-maker Francis Ford Coppola showed up, serving beverages from his private cellar collection. A special setting, says Smith, allows CMOs to really open up.

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with the death of the mass media," he said. "So what replaces it?"

That's part of the ongoing discussion that takes place among the CMOs.

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With consumer-generated Internet blogs proliferating, CMOs must learn how to manage messages and also measure them.

"You can't ask the CEO, because he wants you to have an answer," Smith said. "And your team is looking to you for answers. Your peer group disappears when you reach that pinnacle. So it's like opening a faucet

at these meetings," he said, as CMOs' concerns and ideas come pouring out.

His logo, white on white, embodies his philosophy that he's in the background as the "frictionless intermediary. We're not selling anything. All we do is facilitate, like a country club," he said.



Fruit

The Coca-Cola
Co.



Verses

Verizon
Communications Inc.

Smith, who earned a finance major from the University of Florida, then earned an MBA at Northwestern University, plans to expand the concept to the chiefs of finance, human resources and operations.

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