

The Korea Business Interview Series:

“Brand Korea: From the Boardroom to the World”

With Martin Roll, a world-renowned thought-leader on value creation through brand equity

Transcript of the interview by KBC’s Tom Tucker on May 28, 2010.

Tom: Hi, and thanks for joining us today for the Korea Business Interview Series produced by KoreaBusinessCentral.com the premier information and networking site for conducting business in Korea. My name is Tom Tucker, and I am the host of today’s interview. Today’s topic is branding.

And joining us to talk about this is our guest Martin Roll, who is the Founder and Principal of the Martin Roll Company. Martin has more than 25 years of experience as a global branding expert, and he is author of the international bestseller *Asian Brand Strategy*.

Martin has increasingly focused on how Asian brands are developed, and what they need to do to compete successfully on a global scale alongside their North American and European counterparts.

Martin, every year, travels about 500,000 miles on all continents and speaks at more than 100 global top-level conferences, and he’s also a frequent guest lecturer at some of the world’s leading universities and business schools. Martin, it’s great to have you with us today. Thanks for joining us.

Martin: Thank you very much, Tom. I’m glad to be on the show.

Tom: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Tell us about your background, and why branding interests you so much.

Martin: I think the interest comes all the way back because my father is actually a graphic designer back in Scandinavia. I am Danish by origin. I think, kind of the interest for communication, for colors, how the world is shaped, actually came all the way back from my childhood.

It also lead me into advertising, and I did spend most of my career in the international advertising world and the media world before I set up my own consultancy around ten years ago. I think branding is interesting because we are all somehow related to brands in our lives. Brands are shaping personalities; they serve as focal points of our lives, the way we look at things the things

we do in life. Brands are really part of everyday life. I think that's why it's so powerful to deal with branding.

Tom: Where are you currently located; where are you based?

Martin: I'm based in Singapore.

Tom: Okay. When did you actually start your consulting practice? Are your offices then currently located in Singapore?

Martin: Yeah. I have offices here in Singapore, and I have offices in Copenhagen. But, I would say most of my office activity takes place in many, many different locations, where I spend time with my clients in around 40 countries every year.

So, I must say I am not in Singapore much, but it serves as a fantastic home doing this. I founded it around ten years ago in Singapore. It was kind of based on the interests of the emerging Asian brands, but also based on the assumption that there was so much to do for the Asian firms. So, I felt that Singapore and Asia would be a fantastic home for the company

Tom: So, what are your firm's specialties? Talk about that a little bit.

Martin: I specialize in helping businesses produce better results through brands, not so much from the visual and communication side. Very often, when you think about branding, people think it's a logo, it's a corporate ID, and it's a set of colors. I don't really do that; I leave that to the ad world and the media world.

I try to help people form and shape business strategies in order to produce better brands, and what they can do for their businesses. So, it's very much strategic consulting, but it's focused on the two platforms of branding and marketing.

Tom: So, specify a little bit more for us the types of activities and projects that you're involved in right now.

Martin: They could come in many formats. Sometimes, it's just a one or two hour advisory workshop for a management team somewhere in the world. It might be a company, for example, in the OEM sector that wants to build their own brands instead of just selling OEM products to other firms that are branded.

It can also be much more long-term projects where you look at an already established brand and say, "How can we produce better results here?" in terms of segmentation, brand architecture, global expansion, strategizing, employers, the culture internally in the firm and so forth. So, it really comes out in many, many aspects.

I also advise a lot of CEOs and CMOs in leading organizations around the world. So, a lot of my clients are more on a retainer basis where I would interact with these clients on a regular basis, and help them to achieve better results.

Tom: So, how long have you been involved with branding in Korea? Can you share with us some examples of clients and/or projects in Korea that you've done, or maybe that you're currently involved with?

Martin: I have done business in Korea for around ten years. It took me a few years to get established in Korea as you know, and I think as many foreign firms have realized, it does take time to get a foothold in Korea.

I've done quite a few projects over the last ten years, particularly among the top 20 Korean firms. The only challenge I see is that most of my clients are under pretty strict confidentiality agreements, but if I mention the top 10 or 20, I think most of the audience can probably imagine some of the clients and brand names that I've been working on.

Tom: Certainly. Let's talk a little bit about Asian and Korean brands. A major theme of our discussions here at Korea Business Central is on companies doing business in Korea and on the Korea brand going abroad.

In recent years, especially the Korean government, as you may know, has focused on globalizing the Korea Inc. brand, including promotion of Korean foods abroad. Tell us about your book in light of some of these ideas, *Asian Brand Strategy*. Explore this for us a little bit; why did you write it and what have you learned about Asian brands?

Martin: I think I did write the book originally because I was quite encouraged by the fact that, at least ten years ago, Asia did not have more than maybe five or, say, ten brands on the global table. A few of them came from Japan and a few of them obviously now originated from Korea in terms of the Samsung, the LG, and the Hyundai. So, all in all, Asia had not really produced any brands at that time.

What I realized 8–10 years ago was that a lot of the Korean firms actually showed a huge appetite for going international and getting into the global scene, and that's actually what brought me to Korea in the first place.

The book that I wrote, *Asian Brand Strategy*, has this kind of old world framework, which I refer to as the Asian brand leadership model. It goes around five different very important issues; first of all that the Asian boardrooms, the Korean boardrooms, need to change their mindsets and practices.

I think, until now, marketing has been very much a technical function, but it needs to shift into becoming much more strategic. It has to be lead by the CEO and the boardroom, and that's

something that you rarely see in an Asian organization. That's something that Korean companies are only now changing.

You also need to look at the consumer patterns in Asia because when you look at Asia, Asia is not really not all that homogeneous. In order to understand how we can bring this brand out, how can it become successful, you really need to look at Asia as part of different cultures that are really penetrating the different markets around. So, it kind of calls for much more detailed, much more sophisticated Asian consumers.

Then you also need to have a certain sense of modernity. I think, for quite a few years, Asia was kind of trapped in the past. There was this kind of oriental perception of Asia, of the old days and old cultures; maybe something very exotic.

I think the way for Asian businesses to be successful at this in the region is they need to look at the region as being very modern. Asian consumers are really yearning for something very, very modern in that aspect.

Then you need to become trendsetters. It was, for many years, that Asian businesses were always copying the Western firms and Western brands; L'Oreal, to Nike, to IBM, and Microsoft. But, they need to become trendsetters for themselves if they want to establish an iconic brand. So, this is very much about innovation, and research and development, design and so forth.

Finally, if we are elevating everything to the boardroom and we are doing all of this, we need to make sure everyone in the company is empowered around the brand, so it's really become a strategic focus for everyone involved in the operation.

So, somehow, it was a new paradigm and it's still changing in Asia; many companies haven't got it right yet. But, if I look at what is happening currently in Korea, I think it's definitely something that is now taking place at the highest level in many different Korean corporations.

Tom: I think some of the things that you were just describing here not only apply to Korean and Asian companies, but a lot of these rules and concepts I think are pretty much universal.

Martin: Oh, absolutely. It's still a challenge, even for some of the Western firms. Forget about the Fortune 100 or the Fortune 500; they're doing a pretty good job here. For example, one of the things I've been calling for in Asia is to get a Chief Marketing Officer on the board. If you look at the LG, the Samsung, and the Hyundai, they all have a Chief Marketing Officer.

The fact is only 2 –3 % of the Fortune 500 companies will have a Chief Marketing Officer in the boardroom. That means the marketing for many companies is still very tactical. It's not really represented in the boardroom suite.

Tom: Not quite C-level yet. I was surprised to hear the percentage that you just quoted. Did you say somewhere that less than 5% of top companies have a Chief Marketing Officer?

Martin: Yes.

Tom: That's quite surprising.

Martin: It is, and it's still this struggle that marketing needs to take center stage. Obviously, if you look back at my advertising career that kind of ended ten years ago during the 90s, marketing was very, very tactical and there was this fight for marketers to get better representation at the higher level.

But it also meant marketing was very siloed; that marketing took place in a very tactical function. It was kind of departmental, but it wasn't something that was cascading throughout the entire organization.

If you're claiming that you're delivering the best service, or you have the best design, or you have the best distribution, and it wasn't really something that was cascading down the organization. That's why marketing simply has to be elevated to the highest level.

Tom: Which Asian brands do you feel have been very successful?

Martin: I think a company like Singapore Airlines has been very true to the root and their origin. They're very good in balancing a promise of great service with actually delivering across all the customer touch points.

I think, from the aviation industry Singapore Airlines has done incredibly well. Also, it's due to the fact that it's a very, very profitable airline. Another company like HSBC from Hong Kong, one of the top banks today, 20 years ago, it was a small regional trading bank based in Hong Kong, and today is probably one of the top financial powerhouses.

Obviously, you've got the Samsung, the LG, and the Hyundai, which I think have been extremely successful as well. You have Toyota from Japan, you got ASA and their two hotel chains; one called Banyan Tree that originated in Singapore and you also have Mandarin Oriental out of Hong Kong. But, I like one or two handfuls of very successful Asian brands which I think have even taught the rest of the world how to do things.

Tom: Talk a little bit more about Singapore Airlines. Tell us their brand and talk about how, at Singapore Airlines, the brand is something that totally permeates the entire organizational culture from top to bottom.

Martin: Singapore Airlines starts with a mindset. The airline was founded back in 1973, and it was simply based on the promise that Singapore had no domestic airspace. So, from the inaugural flight, they were forced to compete with some pretty heavyweight airlines in terms of TWA, British Airways, Lufthansa and so forth.

So, they simply decided to say, it might be that we are small, but we have to focus simply on service. We're going to deliver the best service in the world, and we're going to do it through use

of the best technology we can get. So, we're going to source the best aircraft, the best food, the best wine, the best service, and so forth. We're really going to make sure we are leading edge in terms of technology as well.

That's a nice statement. It could just act as a very nice strategy. The way the airport has survived is through an incredible way of training people throughout the entire company from top to bottom.

At any given time, Singapore spends around 15 –20 working days yearly on training everyone within the company. And they have some pretty high benchmarking standards in order to make sure that this promise of great service is actually brought to light, so they're extremely consistent. And they do spend a lot of money on investment in new aircraft, in training, newest technology, bringing things to light and so forth.

So, it's a company that, from the highest level, from the chairman to the ownership level, which is part of the Singapore government, is taken extremely seriously. I think maybe a result of that, and that's from my own account, I think Singapore Airlines because they have done so well as they have, I think they have contributed around 20% of the Singapore national brand because Singapore Airlines has simply been a flying face of the nation of Singapore.

Tom: How about some Korean brands who have done as well?

Martin: I think Samsung has done very well. Samsung is probably the brand that brought Korea to the world; it suddenly showed a face of Korea which I think was unknown to most people outside Korea. LG is now pursuing the same journey, but in a different way. You got a company like Hyundai. Those three companies probably serve as the top ones.

But, you also have an interesting company, for example, like Amore Pacific, which is a cosmetics firm and it's grown from home and they currently are representing ten different organically grown brands, and they are doing extremely well. One of the brands is called Maniche, and that's now one of the fastest expanding cosmetics brands in China.

So, I think there are quite a few Korean brands that are currently undertaking a journey of getting outside the national market and into the international scene.

Tom: You say LG is taking a different strategy compared to what Samsung has done. Talk about LG a bit.

Martin: LG tried to build up the brand in a different way because Samsung surely was the first mover in the category. They moved into many different areas of technology, and they moved into many geographical areas. Obviously, being the next one on the step, you can't just copy what Samsung did.

So, I think in order for them to act differently, I think they're focusing differently in terms of technology offering. Also, the components of the brand; I don't think they just tried to emulate what Samsung did. They, rightly so, need to find their own journey. That's what they're currently working on, and you can see the results of LG over the, particularly, three to five years. They have really gone from a regional international player to a truly global brand, which really has established a footprint in many, many countries worldwide.

Tom: Let's talk about the competitive advantages that Asian brands and, more specifically, Korean brands have.

Martin: I think one thing that really characterizes Asian brands is actually their ability to innovate. 10 or 15 years ago, most Asian brands were copycats. But, I think they've realized there is a lot of talent and there is a lot of knowledge and power in the Asian firms.

I think if you look at some of the Korean firms, they're very, very good in innovating. It's also like when Asian firms are getting the strategy right, they might not necessarily be first movers. Obviously, many Asian firms have been late because throughout the last 50 years of industrialization, a lot of that was actually lead by the Western firms, and obviously Japan as an exception in the Asian region.

But, they're now realizing, "Wait a minute; we can actually do some pretty good stuff here." The same goes for the Chinese firms; they are now spending a lot of money on research and development.

They are increasingly using design as well. Design, 10 or 15 years ago, hardly existed in Asia, but that's now becoming another component. I think the last dimension that really characterizes Asian firms is once they got this strategy right, once they set the direction, they are very good implementers. They are very good in execution. So, once they kind of set the focus on, "This is the way we are going to do it," they are very good in balancing the promise and the delivery side of things.

Tom: How about some of the competitive advantages of the Korean brands?

Martin: I think Korean brands are a hit, first of all, because Korea is so technology driven. I think most of the population has been on the Internet for quite a few years, and they are naturally interested in technology. I think that's also the reason for the rise of some of the big companies from Korea.

I think one of the key advantages of Korean firms is that they are very innovative, and they are spending a lot of money on research and development. They are also incredibly quality focused. Some of the best products, in terms of quality actually originate from Korea today if you look at the entire Asian region. So, I think that Korean firms, in many, many aspects are quite ahead of the rest of the Asian Pacific scene, at this point in time.

Tom: So, if you had to give some of these large Korean companies a letter grade in terms of branding themselves in Asia, and then maybe branding themselves on a more global scale, such as in North America.

How would you grade, how would you rate the effectiveness, the success, of the large Korean conglomerates at branding themselves and selling those brands throughout Asia and globally?

Martin: I think, currently, they are doing very well. I think they are definitely getting a grade A. They have undertaken a tremendous journey over the last ten years. We have to realize that all of the Fortune 500 and the so-called Western brands, it took them maybe 50, or some of them 100 years, to establish their footprint globally.

So, I think, somehow, the Korean brands have gotten into the global scene in a very short period of time. We just have to put a note here though because having a strong brand actually has two components.

First of all, you obviously need to have a very strong functional offering, but a brand is also about some of the emotional aspects. I think what the Korean brands until now have now done very well is they have established a footprint in terms of functional dimensions in terms of design, innovation, quality, pure technology, what goes behind, the security, reliability and so forth.

But, I think still for most of the Korean brands, they are yet to unfold their true emotional component. If you look at a product like iPod, people don't buy the iPod because of technology; they buy it because they buy into an emotional community of like-minded that actually uses the iPod, and actually adores Apple on a global basis.

We don't know each other; we just know that people are out there, and I just want to be part of that community. That's a very strong emotional bond, and I don't think that Korean brands yet have established those emotional bonds, which is natural because, as I said, it's a journey and it takes time. It's almost like a good bottle of wine; it does take 10 – 20 years to mature, and age, and get the full-body flavor of the wine.

Tom: How about some of the up and coming Korean brands that you might know of and what they need to do to be successful?

Martin: I think they need to put the bar a little higher. Some of the upcoming Korean brands are doing very well in Korea, and they have actually started to get into the region. Some of them are lacking the mindset in terms of elevating marketing to the strategic level, and to see marketing as an investment and not a cost on the P&L.

Sometimes, that is lacking, in particular with some of the smaller Korean firms because they don't really see marketing as something that's going to take center stage. The late Professor [??] said there's basically only two dimensions in a company; that's innovation and marketing.

So, I think that Korean firms are going to focus a little more on the marketing side, and they 're really going to put the bar high. I mean, it does take time, it does take resources, and it is an incredibly tiring journey to take a brand from, let's say, regional Northern Asia into the global scene. It's a huge undertaking, and I think that needs to start at the highest level of the corporations.

Tom: This leads me to another point and this is a point I discovered in your reading, especially in today's incredibly competitive global marketplace where, as we move forward in the future, increasingly a lot of people will be buying on price. Ultimately, that increases the importance of having a very strong brand. Talk about that and what that means to companies.

Martin: Yeah. For me, that's a baseline. That's almost a given, that we will expect that, for technology, lifestyle, fashion, cars; whatever... it is sold very much at the same price level. So, that leaves the brand as a different trading point.

It's very important for companies to understand that people don't only buy functional things, in terms of the brand offering; reliability, quality, design, whatever, which obviously could also be a very emotional aspect.

But, they really need to make sure they are creating a different offering in terms of the emotional dimensions. One thing that some of the Asian firms have to understand is they can't just copy what the Western firms have done so well for many years. If you're going to be the 17th mobile brand or the 13th car brand, you're really going to have to bring something different to the market because, if not, people aren't going to follow you; they're not going to create a strong bond here.

So, somehow, the Asian firms have to be a little more confident about their own cultures. One thing that I've described quite in depth over the years in Asia is that Asian consumers and Asian managers have, for long, have something I've referred to as an inferiority complex about their own cultures and their own origin.

It was always whatever came from Hollywood in terms of entertainment and movies, fashion from Milan, cosmetics from Paris were always just a notch better than anything you could find in the Asian region, and I think that kind of paradigm is slowly changing.

That also means some of the Asian firms, moving forward, are going to bring offerings to the market that aren't just distinctively global and is not something that we've necessarily seen before; it's really going to be something that is based on local Asian popular culture and so forth. In that sense, it's going to differentiate much more.

The global consumer has a huge appetite for Asia and for Asian heritage, Asian culture, Asian history, and that's some of those components that need to be infused into some of the future Asian brands.

Tom: For some of these future brands, these future Asian brands, what are the methodologies that they need to employ to become more regional, more global brands?

Martin: First of all, I think they need to get the strategy right. By saying that, I mean they need to make sure that they have the systems and processes in place. Building a brand in the global place is not a random exercise; in fact, it is a very orchestrated effort.

So, first of all, they need to focus on the systems and processes, then they need to think big; they really need to think as a leader. Even though you're small and you're the number 23 company in a certain market, you really need to put the bar high. You need to make sure the CEO, the Chairman, the entire boardroom is really rallied around this journey of getting into the global scene.

Then you just need to make sure you have the time, resources, and money. It's really going to take some resources to get into the global scene here. Then you need to keep innovating. You need to move very fast. One thing that characterizes a lot of Asian firms is once they get it right, once they get on the traction curve, they are really moving into the Western markets with the speed of light, and that's something that I think really distinguishes Asian firms from a lot of other parties.

Then you need to make sure that you get the entire culture around you. It is one thing if the Chairmen sets out to go global, but you also need to make sure everyone within the firm actually understands what it takes to go global.

That may be one note for caution for Asian firms because they tend to be very localized. If you look in the sense of the Korean firms, they mostly employ Koreans. As good as they definitely are, a lot of very good Korean talent, that's been for 10, 15, 20, 25 years overseas and so forth, you still need to make sure, if you want to be truly global, that you actively employ a global culture.

If you look at the likes of Nike, L'Oreal, and Procter and Gamble and so forth, they represent and they employ people from almost any culture on Earth. So, if you want to be truly global you need to mirror that in your cultures as well. In that area, the Korean firms are still way too Korean. You can just look at the management teams of Korean firms, the majority of the directors, and presidents, and CEOs are still native Koreans. I think that has to be diluted somehow over the years to come.

Tom: Many foreigners think the Korean market is a really tough one for companies to do well there. Have you seen examples of foreign companies in Korea whose brands have been successful? And if so, who are these firms and what kinds of strategies have they employed to be successful in Korea?

Martin: I think most of the firms that have been very successful in Korea are firms that have kind of gone along the trial and error path, because getting into Korea as a foreign firm is incredibly complicated.

There is obviously a very interesting market there because there is buying power and there is consumer interest. There is somehow also a certain sense of national pride in Korea among Korean consumers and managers. So, it is, all in all, very, very tough for a foreign firm to establish a foothold here.

The firms that are successful, having a very long-term horizon, and they don't move into Korea with the mindset that it may have from other markets, that we need to hold a certain market share here; we want to become a market leader here.

Getting into Korea, for any foreign firm, I've yet to see any foreign firm with a majority market share in the Korean market. You need to make sure that you want to place second or third while in the market, then I actually think you can do very well, but you need to have a very long-term perspective.

I don't think you necessarily you need to localize as much, that's exactly what brought you in as a Western brand in the first place, as an alternative to some of the very, very strong Korean brands that are to be found locally.

Tom: Can you think of any examples of foreign companies in Korea that are doing well in terms of branding?

Martin: Yeah. I think the likes of the traditional companies like Nike, Coca-Cola, Proctor & Gamble, and so forth are doing well. It doesn't mean they have the majority share, but they are doing a good job in Korea because there is a need for brands that come from outside of the country.

But, as I've said, you won't find companies that are taking a leading market share in the Korean market because there is a certain sense of national pride in almost all categories. You can just look at the car sector, for example. Most of the brands that you'll find in Korea are locally made brands. You hardly see any foreign cars in Korea.

Tom: Do you see any of the world's other auto makers making progress in Korea in establishing their brands?

Martin: I think it's tough. I don't think this is going to change dramatically overnight. It will take some time to convince people that there is actually a need for another foreign brand in the market, particularly in the car sector. It's very, very full of local brands.

You can also go into the cosmetic scene, for example. You hardly see L'Oreal and some of the other global players in Korea. It's very centered around a lot of the local players in the market. If

you look at the mobile phone space, you hardly see Nokia in Korea. There's obviously a lot of the technology players as well. So, it is tough for foreigners to get a foothold. You can get a foothold, but you're definitely not going to take a leading market share.

Tom: Let's talk about branding in the boardrooms. A lot of your experience and work involves getting companies to buy into branding at the boardroom level; the very highest levels. With this in mind, how important is an emphasis on branding by a company, CEO, and a board of directors?

Martin: I think it's crucial, because you can't build a brand from bottom up, particularly in Asia. Many firms try to build a brand from the bottom up in the organization, but it doesn't work that way, because you need to have a strategic focus centered around your brand's promise; it really needs to start from the top of the company.

I think this is very much about changing mindsets because, somehow, Asian firms can acquire all the skills that they need; they have abundant resources and money at their disposal. But, if you really don't have the mindset to say, "This is what I want to do; I want to break out of the OEM track. I don't just want to be regional. I want to take on Nike on a global level."

You really need to have the mindset that everything you do with in the company is actually cascading around a common brand practice, and a common brand strategy.

Tom: Do you see any differences in the importance of branding? For example how much time and resources are dedicated to an organization's brand. Do you see differences by Korean and other Asian companies compared to those in the West?

Martin: I think they don't spend so much on the organizational part compared to the ones in the Western world. There is a huge focus on best practices among Western firms to really focus on the talent, the scouting for new talent, and also making sure the talent you want to retain in the company actually stays around, and actually understand what the culture and the brand is all about.

It is not something that has the same nature in Asia. If you look at the human resources practices in the majority of the Asian firms, they actually act a little differently, and it's very much about the functional aspects.

So, I think when it comes to organization and culture, there's still a huge job to be done for the Asian firms in order for people to really get rallied around the brand and what this company is all about.

Tom: Has there been a trend in recent years by companies in the West and in Asia to raise the profile of corporate leaders responsible for branding, such as maybe including them on the board and maybe giving them that C-level title; for example, like we talked about earlier, Chief Marketing Officer, maybe Chief Branding Officer?

Martin: Yeah, and I think that's quite important that you get a multitasking boardroom in place, people that represent different cultures and different functions. You really got to make sure that the command center of the company moving forward is actually representative of people from various backgrounds and various walks of life that can bring that discussion to the table that's really going to deal with a culture that is very complex, which is very sophisticated, once you're going to move into the global marketplace. I think that is going to be really important for them.

Tom: Are there areas in which Korean companies need to improve in order to strengthen their brands, and how much do you feel this requires more of a top-down effort from senior management?

Martin: I think marketing could still act at a higher level in many Korean firms. Marketing is still very tactical if you look at the majority of the Korean firms. It really needs to be elevated much, much further to the CEOs and the Chairman suite in the company.

Secondly, I think they need to push much harder compared to what they have done until now. I think the first 10 or 15 years of Korea's development into the global scene has been a bit of a trial and error and established kind of the first role of practices.

But, moving forward with a China that's surely going to build their set of brands over the next 5, 10, 15 years, I think it's extremely important for the Korean firms to now push full speed on the journey into the global market.

So, I think, somehow, it's about changing mindsets from just being international or just being regional into something that's really going to cascade around the world. I think, somehow, the Korean firms need to raise the bar moving forward, and they need to shed their inferiority complex because, very often, I get this counter question from clients that's like, "But, can we really do this? Do you think the world would like this? Do you think there's a demand for it? Would global consumers like what we do?"

And I keep telling them, "Yes, they will." They love things that come from Korea because you have a fantastic offering; you have great quality, you have great innovation, you have great design, you've learned a lot. Do push it into the global market. So I think it's very much about changing a mindset to really push much harder.

Tom: Let's talk about branding Korea. In recent years, the Korean government has been aggressively seeking to promote Korea abroad for a number of different areas; tourism, business, and now food. So, looking at these three areas, how has Korea done?

Martin: I think Korea is slowly getting into the global scene. I think one challenge for Korea has been, as for any government, it seems to be there has too many stakeholders involved in the effort. You have tourism agencies, you have business agencies, you've got the government, you've got the President. You've got many people involved in this journey.

That means that Korea has kind of focused on different journeys as they went along. Other countries came before Korea and countries are going to come after Korea, so I think it's very important to somehow, put up a little more of a simple strategic system in order to bring things to life.

Having said that, 15 years back, just 10 or 15 years back, Korea was pretty unknown to outsiders. Korea is still a very unpolished gem, an unpolished jewel to many people outside Korea that have never visited Korea.

Once they realize what Korea has to offer, it's a huge blessing. It's a huge surprise to most visitors, foreigners, business people and so forth. So, I think it's very important for the Korean government to really push very hard moving forward.

Tom: And how can they do that? If you were consulting the decision makers in Korea responsible for promoting the Korean brand internationally, what key three points of advice, recommendations, would you make to those folks?

Martin: I would set up a presidential task force. I think this is no less than something that has to be lead by the President of Korea Mr. Lee Myung-bak. First of all, he has to sit at the end of the table and he has to lead this presidential task force.

Two, I would simplify the command structure because there are many, many agencies involved and there has to be many agencies involved, but somehow there has to be a more simple structure. So, the command structure has to be simplified.

And third, I would simplify the messages. I would focus on maybe three or five different messages, but maybe one or two of those would be the overall cascading message that I would focus on at least for the next five or ten years because branding a country is something very complex, but it's also something that needs to be a little more simplified.

It doesn't mean on the technical level that you can't work on multiple messages in many, many different areas, but Korea – the face of Korea as a nation – has to be a little more simplified, and I think that has to be lead by the highest level. So, I think this is very much about synergizing, simplifying, and then making sure that they are really pushing forward in terms of getting this message out to the world.

Tom: And what key three things or attributes about Korea would you build your strategy around?

Martin: I think I would build it first about business Korea, which I think is a very strong offering. So, business Korea, in that sense, I mean quality, R&D, innovation, I mean what a lot of the Korean technology firms have built a market for. So, that's kind of the business proposal; a message that goes around business Korea.

The second one I would build around Korea as a very innovative society in terms of all the companies operating in Korea. The third one, I would focus on is tourism, not to forget the tourism part. Korea is hugely underrepresented in terms of inbound tourism. I think there are still a lot of things to be done by the Korean government in that aspect.

So, I would surely focus on business, I would focus on Korea as a society, and I would focus on Korea as a tourism destination, which I think is hugely underleveraged.

Tom: And that leads us to the next topic; that is tourism. As you know, there're a myriad of national tourism campaigns and there're lots of local ones. Are the country's many branding efforts confusing and muddled when it comes to tourism? And what would be your advice here on how the country can better brand its tourism activities?

Martin: Yeah. I think, as I've said before, it's very much about a simple messaging structure. It's good to have Seoul communicating on a global level, but Korea is also communicating and I've seen campaigns from Jeju Island and so forth.

I think it needs to be orchestrated a little more under the umbrella brand of Korea as a nation. Obviously, the different regions, the different provinces, the different sectors have to be part of that overall umbrella, but it's very much about a simple structure here.

So, I would put more of the resources, more of the funds, into an overall branding of Korea, and then obviously making sure they get much, much broader, much wider, and much deeper because there are still a lot of messages about Korea to be told to the general world.

There was a study some years back by one of the global ad agencies and they asked the so-called global consumer, "Korea, in your mind, what is that all about?" And the majority of responses related Korea to the Korean War. The Korean War technically ended in 1953, so I think there is still a huge job to be done.

It's probably fair to say that the globalization of Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and many other Korean firms have opened up a lot of people's minds in terms of what Korea has to offer, but it's still a pretty closed society to foreigners, and somehow the society on one side needs to open up a little more. And on the other hand, it's also something that has to be discovered by outsiders.

So, I think, somehow, Korea has to push a little harder because there is a lot to be done in Korea, and there's a lot to be seen in Korea for foreigners. So, I think there is really a huge potential for this society.

Tom: We're getting close to wrapping up here, but I couldn't resist asking you about this next particular area. This is not something that we discussed with you previously coming into this interview, but here again I couldn't resist and I have a feeling you'll have some good thoughts to share on this topic, though it's not particularly your focus or niche.

It's the topic of personal branding. Obviously, that's something that's very important today; it's getting a lot of attention nowadays. Do you have any bits of advice for our members and community members when it comes to personal branding?

Martin: I think personal branding is incredibly important. 10, 15, 20 years ago we used to be a talent with a number. But now, we are suddenly a person of flesh and blood, and we are kind of seen as a brand within the working scene.

So, I think personal branding is very important. It's very important to be very aware of how one portrays oneself in society, not only in terms of business life, but also in private life. We are somehow seen as personal brands in the modern world, which has become so connected and, in that sense, also has become extremely over-communicated.

So, all the issues we've discussed for the commercial firms, I think are starting to apply for people as well from the talent scene because here are a lot of talents out there, and we see new talents coming in from India, from China, and there are a lot of new pools of people coming in to the world scene.

So, I think, at least, from an employer's point of view, it's extremely important to build up a profile for oneself. And it's become a little easier; you've got tools of LinkedIn, and Facebook, and YouTube, and obviously the medium here we're discussing on Korean Business Central and so forth. There are many areas in which one can get oneself heard a little more, and that is important moving forward.

Tom: Great advice. You're working on a couple of books right now. Can you tell us about those a little bit; key points with those books you're working on?

Martin: Yeah. The first one is going to be about the Chief Marketing Officer, exactly the paradigm that we have discussed today. So, it's actually discussing who it is, how it's going to operate, and why the Chief Marketing Officer is so important for modern firms.

The second one is about leadership and branding. That's going to discuss this gray zone between leadership and strategy of firms, and how that actually relates to the two books on branding. I think they go very well in hand, and that's what I am writing the book about. So, I have two books coming out over the next 12–18 months.

Tom: Well, they certainly sound interesting, and we'll look forward to digging into those when they come out. We'll definitely look forward to visiting with you again at a future point. We really enjoyed the conversation today. I think our listeners, Martin, will really enjoy hearing your thoughts and your input.

Martin: Thanks very much. I enjoyed it a lot.

Tom: Our guest today has been Martin Roll of Martin Roll Company. He is a business and brand strategist. Some great insight, some great information today, and it's truly been our treat.

This has been the latest in our ongoing Korea Business Interview Series. I am your host, Tom Tucker, inviting you to improve your business results in Korea by joining KoreaBusinessCentral.com today. Thanks for listening, and have a great day.