

**Gordon Pennington**

Chief Creative Officer

The Marketing and Planning Group, Inc.

At the time of this interview, Gordon Pennington was Chief Creative Officer for the Marketing and Planning Group.

professional

**What are top 3 principles for success in your industry?**

I think if you want to be successful in marketing, you have to have a keen sense of the human situation. You've got to refine perceptions. You've got to refine a combination of both aesthetics and how ideas are communicated along with raw data. You've got to be a great translator. You've got to be able to look at, off the shelf research and know how to make it bespoke, how to customize it to meet specific client needs and interests. You've got to be able to work with people who know how to drill down into the details and then have extraordinary interpretive skills and hopefully be surrounded by a great creative team that will help you with that kind of translation process. But if you're willing to pay attention, listen carefully, find the opportunities to nuance a message. I think that's where marketing, particularly, in a very crowded space now where there's more marketing messages than ever before, you really have to understand the art of differentiation. And that it's ultimately rooted in behavioral science. Anyone in today's market place will constantly have to adapt to change. The key is to be willing to learn, to listen carefully, watch the even horizon for change and prepare for it.

**What character qualities do you look for when hiring?**

Well, any leader has got to be willing to put himself on the line. I think military history is probably our greatest source of the opportunity to study in fine detail the characteristics of people who are given the responsibility for lives on the firing line, literally. A General who is going to put men and resources at risk, is certainly going to have to ask himself if he'd be willing to take that position. Are the objectives clear enough and vital enough that the risks that have to be undertaken are worth the reward? I think that has to be an ongoing discussion. However, in corporate life, the implications of change, the dimensions of this kind of exercise of power often only financial or seems to be financial and yet they have implications on people's lives. Massive lay-offs and the need to reapportion resources affect human beings. They affect societies. Increasingly, in global business, they affect entire nations and people groups. So it's vital, I think for the responsible or the conscientious leader to bear in mind that we must think globally and act locally and those actions have repercussions. I suppose leaders need to cultivate a sense of humanity most of all. And that's a question that is very often under explored, if it's explored at all. What does it mean to be fully human, fully alive, fully open to other human beings? I think that's something that individually and collectively entire nations, societies, people's groups, are wrestling with, as the world is changing, so quickly. Technology's forced these questions upon us, but we have not always embraced them. Very often the bottom line, profitability, portioning resources, our approach to global success precludes our sense of what kind of impact this makes on the people that are variously benefited or challenged by our actions, individually and as representatives of a collective, corporate community.

**Who are your heroes and why?**

I probably haven't suffered from hero worship much. I've probably been someone who's a bit more skeptical about heroism. Having read a sufficient number of biographies to know that there's an Achilles heel to virtually every great leader. But at the same time, without suffering from ... if I may say suffering ... from a need for a mythologies about human beings, I do admire those characteristics within people that allow them to be vulnerable at the same time as they're experiencing tremendous



success. One of the requirements of true leadership is a sensitivity to the realities of the human situation and the needs of those who are disempowered. One of the hallmarks of any great government organization or even a civilization is how those who have power treat those who are powerless. And I think it's critical in the civilized world, that we really take stock of how that is applied in our lives, in our societies, in our communities, in our own environments. We cannot escape those questions. Because they will come back to haunt us, individually or communally at some point or another.

personal

### **How do you define success? How has your definition evolved?**

Certainly there are a number of different metrics that can define success. For some it may be financial statements or may be found in statements of personal net worth. On the other hand, you can become a slave to a system that affords you more and more success, but requires more and more from you. It seems to me the balance is everything. What are your priorities, what do you really want to look back on your life and feel that you had done most significantly? Where do you find significance? What's the measure of your sense of worth? What do you look for in other people? And frankly, I don't think people stop long enough to measure that and take a good, hard look at it. Usually, it ends up requiring some kind of head on collision with life an experience. A crisis that makes people stop for a moment and take a look at what's really important. Time passes quickly, life is suddenly short. And the difference is, where you want to go, where do you want to be as you reach a trajectory that takes you out of the present experience, out of the life that we know into something entirely unfamiliar. Or maybe you can prepare yourself in such a way that it will be slightly more familiar, but very few reports have come back from the other side of the veil.

### **What does balance mean to you? How important is balance to success?**

Balance as theory and balance as practice end up being two different things, very often. But I think first of all, it's setting boundaries and recognizing where your abilities stop and other necessities begin. And being able to discipline yourself according to a larger purpose. Being able to look back and say, "There are things that I have to include in my life and I might not otherwise find time for them, but here's the beginning of one thing and the end of another" and that's a constant reapportioning of our time, our resources and what we're doing. And I think inevitably, we have to become willing to live with our decisions and become comfortable with that. Very difficult to please everybody, but we've got to know what's required of us, as individuals.

### **How do you prioritize your time/values? What are your priorities?**

Setting priorities means taking stock of your life. Whether you do that annually with some sense of reflection, whether you do that at the request of others or as a result of a certain pattern of experience or conditioning, depends on who you are and how often you have to reset those priorities. The challenge is when you're so busy, where things are going very, very well and you find you haven't the time. Time's the most valuable commodity in the world. And taking time or making time is an art in itself. But if you don't do it, you're going to regret it because you can never get it back. Time has no shelf life at all. I found myself accommodating life based on the decisions I make and where they take me. And travel occupies a considerable portion of my time. As a result, I have found myself accommodating the requirements of that kind of heavy travel schedule. So I use time on airplanes and at airports and in transition to think and reorient myself, to get a perspective on life. Sometimes I'm in other countries or cultures that allow me to look back on where I've been and possibly see myself and my circumstances in a new way. I find that people in other cultures and other countries have helped me to do that. And I value that greatly. I think exposure to other cultures and ways of looking at life, ways of looking at time, ways of looking at material values, ways of looking at what we do with our lives, is a rare and wonderful gift.

spiritual



## **Can you follow Christ and still have a successful career, family and such?**

Great question. Your life is going to be changed by the people around you. And you're going to influence the people around you. You're going to be influenced by the people around you and you're going to likely have some influence on them. It's critical that you decide who you want to spend time with. I think one of the great things about having any kind of ability to select ideas, whether it's the form of books or other sources of communication, or people themselves, gives you an opportunity to elect how you're being shaped. Reading great authors is spending time with their deepest, most articulate, carefully reasoned thoughts. What an extraordinary opportunity to get into someone's head. Now, if you believe that there is actually some reason, design and intelligence to life itself, this all isn't just meaningless, tandom collision of molecules. You're going to want to spend time with those sources of information or personality that express that meaning, that design, that intelligence, I suppose. So the more I spend time with the author whom I ... supposed to be ... I'm seeking more and more understanding. But if you're introduced to someone who you believe reasonably could be an author of the most beautiful poem that's ever been written and if you believe your life is poetry and you're part of some great work of art and remarkable wonder that is all around you, you're going to want to spend time with that person. The author has a way of dipping his pen in fresh ink and writing more lines into my life and finishing chapters that are unfinished and solving mysteries and introducing new wonders. It is the best and most amazing experience to journey with the author. Everything else is less than original.



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