

The Magazine for Growing Companies

What's Better Than a Brand?

How to Use Your Personal Story to Create an *Emotional Brand* for Your Company

"It makes sense for us to put resources into something that's good for the community. It reinforces the company's personality, and our customers connect with that." Trish Karter, CEO of Dancing Deer Baking Co., #15 on the Inner City 100 list

THE INNER CITY 100

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#3

**STRAIGHT-UP
COMPETITION:**
"It's not my style
to sell anything
other than my
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RODNEY EVANS,
CEO OF SKYLINE
CONNECTIONS

Photograph by Brian Doben

THE WALLS OF Rodney Evans's cluttered New York City office give you a sense of who he is. There is the Knicks home schedule scribbled on a whiteboard. There is a certificate of merit that his daughter received at nursery school. There are framed photos of Muhammed Ali with Malcolm X that Evans bought for five bucks from a street vendor, and also a huge poster of Aretha Franklin. And by the door is a photo of the U.S. Capitol taken on October 16, 1995, the day of the Million Man March.

Evans snapped that shot himself, standing on the fender of a truck for a better vantage point. The event lives in his memory as a turning point. "It was good to see so many African American brothers from places like Alaska and New Mexico," he recalls. "We talked about really helping ourselves, so when I came back, I gave two weeks' notice, quit my job, and started a company."

Seven years later, **Skyline Connections Inc. [#3]** has grown to revenues of \$14 million. The company started out as a hardware reseller but has evolved into a business that sells network and information-technology services to clients like Lockheed Martin and Bank of America. Evans says his ambition is to take his business to \$100 million. With a five-year compound annual growth rate of 124%, his claim cannot be dismissed.

Skyline happens to be the highest-ranked minority-owned company on *Inc.*'s fourth annual Inner City 100 list. Many entrepreneurs would consider that credential a major achievement, but Evans has historically approached the "minority" label with some reluctance. "Obviously, when I walk in the door and hand you a business card that says I'm president and CEO, you know that Skyline is a black-owned business," Evans says. "But it's not my style to sell anything other than my services and products. I like to compete straight up." The CEO, 49, asserts the standard Skyline pitch is to "sharpen a pencil and come up with some good numbers."

His way is not the only way, however. Among the entrepreneurs on this year's Inner City 100, quite a few offer a provocative contrast to Evans's



STARTING FROM SCRATCH:
"I don't have connections. I haven't lived in this town for 40 years. I was born in Brazil, and my parents are both immigrants. I think I lose a lot because I don't have that network that goes back a generation. That's a very big deal."

MARINA INEZ POROPAT, CEO OF INTAGLIO

"numbers first, identity second" approach. They seem much more comfortable crafting and then selling a story around their own identity, ranging from their background to their skin color. Davin Wedel, who runs **Global Protection [#94]**, a condom manufacturer, wraps his company in slacker slickness by telling people how he started it from his college dorm. Veronica Rose, CEO of **Aurora Electric [#5]**, says 80% of her potential

"I DON'T THINK IN A COMPANY THAT'S HAD OUR GROWTH WE EVER PLAN FOR A DOWNSIDE. THERE ARE ALWAYS SETBACKS, BUT EVERYBODY'S ALWAYS LOOKING FOR IT TO GO UP. I THINK IT'S BETTER TO LOOK AHEAD THAN STAND AROUND TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHERE YOU WERE." #86

BOB PLITT, PRESIDENT OF THE PLITT COMPANY

List

For this year's fastest-growing privately held businesses based in America's urban cores, not even a roller-coaster economy could seriously slow the pace of growth

clients want "all the details" about what her life as a female electrician is like. Divorcée-cum-CEO Carol Latham, who employs many former welfare mothers at her polymer manufacturer **Thermagon** [#16], was cited in Thomas Petzinger Jr.'s *The New Pioneers*, a noted business book. And Lanre Olottu, who emigrated from Nigeria in 1980, says he details his background on almost every sales call he makes for his company, **Printing Methods** [#61].

Using your life story to sell your company is one form of what experts call emotional marketing—getting customers to take an interest in your business not just because you offer a snazzy value proposition but because they feel something about your company. If CEOs are comfortable talking about themselves—and can connect their story to their customers' needs—emotional branding can be a freebie competitive advantage for a small business. "I never wanted it to be about me, but people got such a kick out of me," says Rose. "That's what I needed to do to get my foot in the door." But as Rose and other CEOs on the Inner City 100 can attest, tying a company's identity to its leader can be a tricky proposition, both for the emotional toll it can take on the CEOs themselves and for their companies' long-term growth.

IVAN J. JUZANG, CEO of **MEE Productions Inc.** [#20], is among the most adept of the emotional brand builders on the Inner City 100 this year. His communications-research and media company, located in blighted North Philadelphia, offers its take on the tastes of black urban youth to customers ranging from New Line Cinema to the National Institutes of Health. Like many entrepreneurs who engage in emotional marketing, Juzang honed his story when he was looking for investors. "People like the story of how we started," he says. "I was head coach of a little league basketball team in Pittsburgh—I went to Carnegie Mellon—and I saw how young people gravitated to hip-hop music and hip-hop culture."

From there Juzang went to IBM and then to Wharton for his M.B.A. As a class assignment, he wrote a business plan for a company that would make videos that blend hip-hop music with a self-help motivational message geared toward kids. Juzang's team presented the plan to some venture capitalists that his professor brought to class. But their reaction to the idea was negative. "They kept asking me, 'Where's the research?'" Juzang recalls. "They wanted to know what did I know about low-income African American urban youth? I was this guy from Wharton." It was then that he realized there might be a marvelous market opportunity for figuring out what inner-city kids like and want, and why.

After Wharton, Juzang honed his pitch and started shopping around his business plan. The new and improved version mitigated the VCs' criticism by promising that the start-up would extensively survey at-risk youth to get feedback on its videos. Juzang even suggested that the company would employ urban street kids in the making of its videos as a means of ensuring the work's street cred.

Even though Juzang was starting an "asset-lite" media consulting company in the midst of the 1991 recession, some people found his story irresistible. Calvert Social Venture Partners, a Virginia venture-capital fund that invests in companies that it sees as both moneymaking and socially responsible, decided to invest \$50,000 in the start-up. An angel investor who read about the company in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called Juzang out of the blue

Benchmark

The IC 100 by sector:	
Service	58%
Manufacturing	31%
Distribution	9%
Retail	2%

1 STARGATE Pittsburgh, PA	Provides Internet-technology services
2000 revenues	\$31,407,581
Full-time employees/part-time employees	360/10
Five-year sales growth	4,450%
Compound annual growth	160%
2 GRT Stamford, CT	Provides IT consulting services
2000 revenues	\$6,601,393
Full-time employees/part-time employees	47/0
Five-year sales growth	2,726%
Compound annual growth	131%
3 SKYLINE CONNECTIONS New York, NY	Provides network and IT services
2000 revenues	\$14,371,299
Full-time employees/part-time employees	22/0
Five-year sales growth	2,398%
Compound annual growth	124%
4 AUCTION SYSTEMS AUCTIONEERS & APPRAISERS Phoenix, AZ	Conducts auctions and appraisals
2000 revenues	\$4,180,360
Full-time employees/part-time employees	13/10
Five-year sales growth	2,264%
Compound annual growth	121%
5 AURORA ELECTRIC Jamaica, NY	Installs and maintains electrical systems
2000 revenues	\$5,077,990
Full-time employees/part-time employees	20/0
Five-year sales growth	2,055%
Compound annual growth	115%
6 CHANLER LEWIS Waterbury, CT	Manufactures architectural millwork
2000 revenues	\$6,142,879
Full-time employees/part-time employees	61/1
Five-year sales growth	2,035%
Compound annual growth	115%
7 MIRATEK El Paso, TX	Provides IT products, systems, and services
2000 revenues	\$4,288,420
Full-time employees/part-time employees	28/10
Five-year sales growth	1,964%
Compound annual growth	114%
8 TUCKER TECHNOLOGY Oakland, CA	Installs and engineers telecom and IT systems
2000 revenues	\$7,414,066
Full-time employees/part-time employees	130/2
Five-year sales growth	1,645%
Compound annual growth	104%
9 SUCCESSLAB LEARNING CENTERS* Chicago, IL	Provides educational services
2000 revenues	\$4,094,823
Full-time employees/part-time employees	44/120
Five-year sales growth	1,599%
Compound annual growth	103%