

CHAPTER 8

Making You a Priority: Leveraging Internal Strengths



Ricki Fairley, Founder, President, and Thought Leader of Dove Marketing

When starting and running a business, there is always a to-do list. Most entrepreneurs will tell you they would not have it any other way. While we are all accustomed to multitasking, sometimes making our own well-being a priority becomes the last item or gets pushed to the next day. Many entrepreneurs neglect their most important asset—themselves. Unfortunately, it often takes something catastrophic in order for us to prioritize ourselves and our health.

Ricki Fairley is the Founder, President, and Thought Leader of Dove Marketing, an agency with a mission to deliver iconic thinking, strategic problem solving, and creative genius to clients seeking profitable business results. She is a seasoned marketer with over 30 years of marketing experience, including 20 years in brand management at Johnson & Johnson, Nabisco, Reckitt & Colman, and the Coca-Cola Company, and over ten years in agency leadership, encompassing strategic planning and consulting for several Fortune 500 companies. Ricki has received numerous awards and accolades, including the Leadership Award from the Creative Thinking Association of America; the Association of National Advertisers Multicultural Excellence Award for African American advertising for the Obama for America campaign; the Game Changer Award from *Café Mocha*; and the *Atlanta Tribune* and the US Commerce & Trade Research Institute Excellence in Marketing Award.

She has been named a Top 100 Marketer by *Black Enterprise* magazine and has been inducted into the HistoryMakers. Her client roster includes the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), Dr. Julianne Malveaux, The Hester Group (USDA, USMBDA, Corner Bakery Cafe), Added Value, The Howard Theatre Restoration, and TV One.

Prior to starting her company, Ricki held the position of chief marketing officer and partner at IMAGES USA, a boutique advertising agency in Atlanta where she managed strategy and planning for all IMAGES USA clients and led the implementation of successful and award-winning campaigns for Amtrak, Sara Lee, Wachovia, Wells Fargo, Glory Foods, the National Black Arts Festival, Teach for America, and Brown Forman. She also directed the agency's new business development initiatives that maintained its position as a leading multicultural marketing firm.

Ricki holds a BA from Dartmouth College and an MBA from Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. She is the president emeritus of the Black Alumni of Dartmouth Association, and board chair of Kenny Leon's True Colors Theatre Company. She serves on the board of directors for R&B singer Ne-Yo's Compound Foundation. Ricki manages the relationship between the Links, Inc. and the White House Office of Public Engagement as a member of the National Women's Issues and Economic Empowerment Committee, and is a member of the Silver Spring, Maryland, Chapter of the Links, Inc.

She is a member of the board of trustees for the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation and works diligently to garner publicity for breast cancer awareness. She is also a member of the 2011 class of Leadership Atlanta.

Ricki shares her story of how a life-changing diagnosis forced her to reprioritize her life, which included starting a business and putting herself at the top of her personal to-do list.

Destined for Success

Ricki went to college at Dartmouth College, where she earned her BA degree in English. As a highly sought-after Ivy League graduate, she was able to consider a number of programs. A counselor at Dartmouth told her she should check out Northwestern University's

business school. At the time, although the school was the number one school in the country for brand management, it was not yet the world-renowned Kellogg Graduate School of Management that we know it to be today (it was renamed Kellogg during Ricki's second year). They were gaining a reputation as a top-tier marketing program.

She took a marketing class and fell in love with it, noting that all or most of her professors were authors of marketing textbooks that, even today, are used all over the world. Back then, brand management was a new format that more and more consumer products companies were adopting as a means of managing their marketing efforts in a more strategic and entrepreneurial manner. Although both her parents were educators, she recalls having her professors explain to her father exactly what brand management was, what she would be doing with her life, and assuring him that she would have a great career ahead of her.

In those days, companies held nightly receptions and actively recruited black students for scholarships. She received a full scholarship for graduate school from Quaker Oats. While searching for an internship closer to her home in Washington, D.C., a friend had just gotten an internship with McNeil, the makers of Tylenol. So Ricki applied and earned a spot as well. Upon graduation from business school, she received a full-time offer of employment from McNeil.

Corporate Star

When Ricki arrived at McNeil in 1982, she was suddenly plunged into the tragic Tylenol tampering case, which claimed the lives of seven people. She recalls that the episode was extremely terrifying and beyond anything she could have ever imagined. For several weeks, it was all boots on the ground, all the time. It was with that experience that Ricki cut her teeth in corporate marketing. She stayed at McNeil for a few years after that and sought opportunities in other categories. If you check your house, chances are there is a

product that Ricki has worked on as a brand manager. After leaving McNeil, she went on to work at companies such as Johnson & Johnson, Nabisco (Life Savers, Bubble Yum), and Reckitt & Colman (Lysol, Easy-Off, Black Flag, Mr. Bubble) to name a few.

Although she did not set out to become an entrepreneur, Ricki was increasingly challenged with assuming entrepreneurial functions within the corporate environments in which she worked. At Reckitt & Colman, trade marketing was becoming an area of focus, with major accounts asking for special pricing and promotional considerations. In response to this, she was asked to start a trade marketing department, allocating marketing budgets by trade accounts (i.e., Sam's Club or K-Mart), or by channel (i.e., food, drug, mass, warehouse club), and managing spending based on their sales.

She was later recruited to Coca-Cola to re-engineer their marketing services department, which was renamed MarketingWorks and functioned like an intercompany agency. Her group serviced all 21 of the company's brands and was responsible for the activation of all promotions that the company had in the market. She estimates that her group could easily be working on a thousand promotions at any given time. She grew her division from 50 employees to 150, and had annual staffing and marketing budgets of \$10 million and \$400 million, respectively.

Ricki loved what she did and felt like she had her "dream job." However, she hit the glass ceiling (which was no surprise—she had hit it two times in previous stints). At the time, she was the third-highest-ranking African American woman at Coke and the only one with profit and loss responsibility, in that her actions directly impacted the bottom line for the company. She was in a visible position and had a very important role within the company, but in the big picture of Coca-Cola USA, she did not feel respected. As an African American woman, she realized there were probably not a lot of options that would be available to her or that she would be

interested in, and began contemplating her next move. She was sure that she did not want to go through the process of giving everything she had to another company, knowing eventually there would only be so far that she could advance within its ranks.

Ricki left Coke and became a partner at IMAGES USA. She managed the strategy and planning side of the business, while her partners handled the business development. This was an ideal arrangement, and ownership was just what she needed at this stage of her life. It gave her the freedom to do what she loved, with the opportunity to share in the profits derived from her efforts.

However, all of her elite training and accomplishments could not have prepared her for what was to be her next life-changing experience.

Deadly Diagnosis

The day started like any other high-stress day in the life of a type-A working mom and wife. During her annual gynecological checkup, her doctor found a lump in Ricki's left breast. But all Ricki could think about was she had to get back to work, figure out what she was going to cook for dinner, and make plans for her upcoming week-long business trip. "I didn't really have time for the mammogram, sonogram, biopsy, or that diagnosis," she recalls. But soon enough, after a positive biopsy and a confirmed breast cancer diagnosis, she had to make time and deal with it. The pathology report confirmed that she had triple-negative breast cancer. What was supposed to be a tiny, early-stage tumor turned out to be fast growing, aggressive, and malignant.

"You Have to Figure Out How to Remove All Stress from Your Life"

In Ricki's first meeting with Nancy, her nurse and breast cancer coach, Nancy started the conversation with, "When you walk out

of here today, you have to figure out how to remove all of the stress in your life.” Of course, Ricki denied having stress in her life. She had grown so accustomed to being a multitasking, miracle-working African American woman, she never had time to entertain the concept of stress in her life. Nurse/coach Nancy then added the bomb-dropping statement that would change her mind-set and dictate her behavior throughout her healing process and, really, for the rest of her life. “Your life depends on it.” Hearing these words, Ricki surmised that her life as she knew it would never be the same again. However, as she began to reflect, that might not be such a bad thing.

Develop a Survivor Mentality

Ricki had to make decisions about her physical and emotional state in order to remove the stress. She took the most radical medical route available—a double mastectomy, aggressive chemotherapy, and radiation. Her mastectomy identified that the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes, putting her at Stage 3A. Stage 4 is terminal. While many members of the medical community consider this an extreme measure, Ricki felt it was the best choice for her and a choice that her doctors were proud of her for making. She credits Dr. Yvette Williams, an assistant professor at Emory University’s School of Medicine and a cancer survivor who also underwent the procedure. “She was a mentor and dear sista-friend and really helped me to make this decision and undergo this process,” says Ricki. It was also during this time that she tapped into her inner strength to make hard decisions to change her life.

Incorporate Activities That Bring You Joy and Fulfillment

While she was undergoing chemotherapy to defeat the physical cancer, Ricki had to start working on the *emotional* cancers in her life.

In short, she had to reprioritize all aspects of her life, and she had to come first. She filed for divorce from her husband of 30 years. She also changed her environment. After her divorce was final, she sold her house in the suburbs of Atlanta. An avid lover of the water, she moved to the beach.

She then made the decision to sever her relationship with her business partner. While this was a necessary decision, it was also one of the hardest, as she needed income more than ever. She was undergoing expensive treatments, had a daughter in college, and needed to support herself.

She went to the annual Black Enterprise Women of Power Conference, which she attended every year. This conference is for African American women corporate executives. After a particularly tense call with her former business partner to discuss the terms of her exit, Ricki decided that she would start her own agency. She proceeded to brainstorm names for her company with her girlfriends. She decided on Dove Marketing as she felt it represented her survival, healing, and—for the first time in a long while—the freedom and liberation she felt. She focused her energy on building a client roster, specializing in firms that have a favorable impact on society. Her first client was the Obama for America campaign. She found that writing and producing all of the radio ads targeting African Americans for President Barack Obama's re-election became a part of her healing process. Several other clients soon followed, making the launch of her business a huge success and the right decision for her. "Although I transitioned, and in some ways, downsized my life, I have never been happier or more fulfilled," says Ricki. "I've always felt the work that I did was important, but in many ways, I've found a renewed serenity, contentment, and purpose that I might not have explored had I not received my diagnosis," she adds.

She also began to volunteer for causes and with organizations that resonated with her, such as Kenny Leon's True Colors Theatre

Company and R&B singer Ne-Yo's Compound Foundation, which works to enhance the well-being of youth growing up in foster care and group homes. She also began volunteering for the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation, where she works diligently to garner publicity for breast cancer awareness.

Develop a Supportive Network

Through her year of recovery and healing, and also in her professional life, Ricki says she was blessed with love and caring from her family and so many friends from every area of her life. The six weeks of initial healing time after her mastectomy were really hard.

“When I woke up from the surgery, I felt like a truck had hit me and then backed up over me again,” she recalls. “It was no joke: I had chemo on Fridays and was pretty much out of commission until the following Wednesday. One thing I am grateful for, though, is the fact that I was never alone. I could not have made it without my incredible mom, my force-to-be-reckoned-with younger sister, my two beautiful, brave, brilliant, and bodacious daughters (who were 19 and 26 at the time), and my supportive and loving sista-friends who stepped in and stepped up, taking care of me and pouring unconditional love on me while I healed.”

Put Your Oxygen Mask On First

Being a frequent traveler for work, Ricki recalled the words that the flight attendant says just before the plane takes off: “Put the oxygen mask on yourself first, before helping others.” She had to learn to make herself a priority in every aspect of her life. “Some of the hardest decisions I ever had to make were made while I was going through chemo,” she says. “After everything that I’ve dealt with, I know that I have the strength to overcome anything.” She considers herself not just a breast cancer survivor but a survivor in life.

50 Billion Dollar Boss Moves

Starting and running a business requires you to be healthy. To make yourself a priority during this time, you should:

- Develop a survivor mentality;
- Incorporate into your life activities that bring you joy and fulfillment;
- Develop a supportive network; and
- Put *your* oxygen mask on first.