

Every business starts as a small business, English UK Marketing Conference hears

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People aren't the most important part of your business: your brand is, the English UK Marketing Conference was told.

"Quite often people say the brand is important, but most important asset is our people. I say yes, organised to do what? Unless you're trying to build a consistent idea together, something long term, they can be fragmented. People have a horrible habit of dying or leaving or taking clients and customers elsewhere, and you need to make sure you're building something of residual value: it's just so important people get that," said brand guru Rita Clifton in a lively opening presentation to around 200 delegates at a central London hotel, at the start of a day spanning sessions on marketing, markets and also staying on top form with a demanding workload.

In a session tailored to the ELT sector, Rita explained that the brand is an organisation's most sustainable asset, and has to be engrained into the company down to the way staff answer the phones and the way the office looks. Every firm needed clarity and coherence about what it stood for.

"You've got to benchmark yourself against best practice: you never know who's going to be coming into sector next. Think of those disrespectors of categories, Apple and Amazon. You never know who's going to come in. You've got to professionalise, make the most of whatever you've got, no matter your size and scale."

She said that there were opportunities for small businesses but staff had to be on board. "People expect me to show sexy videos about social media, but my killer insight is that in a digital age you've got to be a bloody good business and love what you do, and people who come and connect or learn with you have to love it too. You have to make sure everybody in the organisation knows how you are different, what you offer, what you stand for and believe in and that they care about it too."

Branding was, she said, a virtuous circle: strong brands needed to spend less on recruitment and marketing. "You can't afford not to do it," she said.

Asked about the risk to UK-based ELT centres, she said it was important to make your offer different to others, otherwise someone else would spot an opportunity. "You have to do it differently, think about how to do that even if the core material is the same, the way it's presented or experienced can always create a distinction. You don't have to be a big company: Google was just two blokes. OCAS was a couple of blokes. Innocent was three blokes squashing fruit in a back room. Every business starts as a small business."

Helen Thompson of the Mayfair School of English was one of many delegates praising Rita Clifton's session. "It was great that she was encouraging small businesses to work on their brand, as we can feel like small fish in a big pond. I think that was very useful and encouraging." Another delegate, Christina Thatcher from Celtic in Cardiff said that session was particularly relevant as her centre has just rebranded itself. "It's the first time I've been to this and I've really enjoyed it. We've

also really enjoyed the Sheffield session on appealing to students - we're a non-traditional destination and there was some fantastic stuff in there."

Another first-time, Laura Mould from the Excel School of English said: "It's been a great opportunity for me to be among my peers and exchange best practice, and make sure our marketing is the best it can be. It's been very informative."

Huan Japes, English UK's Deputy Chief Executive for Professional Services, was also pleased. "Rita got us off to an excellent start with branding and thinking about the identity of our language centre, and we've had some very useful reports on very specific markets, Hannah Alexander talking about ego states, and Adrian Liley giving us some fundamental strategies on marketing, as well as other interesting sessions on PON students and more. And to finish it all we had a session on health and welfare, which I think was worth doing and seems to have struck a chord with many of our delegates."

Henry Tolley, of conference sponsor Trinity College, was also delighted with the day. "Great themes, great venue - there's been a really good feel to today. English UK has got a lot of experience in these events and it seems to have gone really well today."

In other popular sessions, Samir Zaveri of BMI explained the nature of the growing market in South America, with large proportions of the population aged under 25 and economic stability. Markets were growing by between 20 and 100 per cent, he said, outlining reasons in each country for increased interest in learning English and also Government schemes to fund overseas study.

Stephen Smith of the Anglo Mexican Foundation talked about the Mexican market, which had benefited from signing large numbers of free trade agreements so that the economy was booming and there was an increased demand for English. "The market is wide open: it's absolutely right to do great things," he said.

Adrian Liley's Anti-Marketing session gave many nuggets of advice, including telling memorable stories to attract students: one school's building had been included in a Van Gogh painting, for instance, he said. And like Rita Clifton, he urged centres to find a unique selling point. "We all say the same thing. I am saying to you find something really different."

And finally, Celynn Erasmus put smiles on faces by urging delegates to become their own CEOs - chief energy officers - by changing habits, but slowly, to healthier ones. Her advice included a healthy breakfast within a couple of hours of waking, smart snacks every 2 or 3 hours, a very short break to stretch every half hour or so, and eating a "colour canvas" of vegetables.

Notes to Editors

1. English UK is the world's leading language teaching association, with more than 470 accredited centres in membership. It covers university and further education college language departments, international study centres in independent schools, educational trusts and charities, and private sector colleges. English UK is a UK registered charity (www.englishuk.com).
2. English UK's Professional Services department organises several specialist conferences each year, The Marketing Conference was held at the Thistle Marble Arch on 6 February and sponsored by Trinity College.
3. For more information, please contact Huan Japes, deputy chief executive (Professional Services) of English UK on Huan@Englishuk.com or Tom Weatherley, Professional Services Manager on Tom@Englishuk.com