

As the new head of WPP's joint venture with LiveWorld, Alex Norman has entered the fascinating world of online brand communities. He talks to **Kevin McCormack**

# From entrepreneur to community worker

## PROFILE

**A**LEX NORMAN didn't have to think hard before making the decision to become CEO of the LiveWorld-WPP joint venture in October.

"Once I learned about the model and the project, it was just a 'no brainer,'" says the 34-year-old. "Then I met Peter, who I have a lot of respect for," he adds, referring to LiveWorld, Inc.'s chief executive officer Peter Friedman. "He's been in the internet and the online community businesses since 1984. Not many people can say that they've been actually doing this for over 20 years."

LiveWorld-WPP was unveiled in July. "It is a brilliant marriage between best-in-class resources, dedicated to delivering powerful solutions for brands looking to enhance their relationships with consumers," enthuses Norman. The investment also gives WPP the industry's largest player in the social networking space.

Last September, WPP was so encouraged by the reaction to LiveWorld-WPP, it joined a \$2 million financing round for LiveWorld.

Connecting brands and people is familiar territory for Norman. "Building unique relationships with consumers has always been a critical part of my marketing career, whether it was across cultural lines at Wal-Mart or with driving passion for motoring for the Mercury Marauder – it is those unique connections that build long term relationships between brands and consumers", he says.

Norman, born into a Caribbean household in the suburbs of New York – his parents hail from Trinidad and Tobago – cut his teeth in the lifestyle and relationship marketing arena at Ranor, a company he co-founded. Ranor developed brands and licensing programs targeting specific ethnic communities for major American retail outlets, such as Wal-Mart Stores. After selling the company in 1997, He then translated this multicultural experience into a job at Ogilvy & Mather New York, working on the IBM business. "I was mostly seen as the multi-cultural guy there," he smiles.

After a combined seven years with Ogilvy and Y&R Brands, Norman left to start a brand consultancy, winning regional research and strategy assignments for a major import beer brand before joining

American talent agency Endeavor as marketing director, driving marketing and branded entertainment initiatives.

Mark Read, WPP's strategy director, explains why he was chosen for the LiveWorld-WPP job: "Alex brings a number of critical qualities to LiveWorld-WPP – he's an entrepreneur, which is essential at a start up. He has a deep understanding of relationship marketing. He also knows how WPP works and is familiar with a number of our clients. He's the man to oversee this joint venture."

And Friedman adds: "Alex's ability to grow business in segmented markets and his skill in the area of branded entertainment all come to play at LiveWorld-WPP. His ability to interface comfortably not only with LiveWorld and WPP, but with the clients of WPP's operating companies, is leading to very exciting results."

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Norman says that the mission at LiveWorld-WPP is "to enable WPP companies with the tools and the intelligence to leverage this exploding arena of online communities and social networking. We want to help their clients reach a higher level of engagement, with both public and private networks driving brand and business results."



His strategy involves "bringing in the brightest and most experienced minds in the industry". LiveWorld-WPP's methodology is to understand each client's goals and objectives through a community lens; then to build a unique community backbone that supports collaborative thinking from agency teams; and, finally, to manage, moderate, support and track it on the company's servers.

He adds: "In 2007 we hope to partner more closely with more WPP market research firms to further enhance our intelligence around community and the long term impact on brands."

Thus far, LiveWorld-WPP is hot. "The demand is great among the agency teams who understand the

power of social networking and its impact on building brands," says Norman. "It's not about being online or offline, it's about being connected that matters most for the new generation of consumer. They travel freely between the two worlds and need brands to do the same."

Norman, whose hobbies include playing percussion, dancing salsa and playing tennis, is confident about the LiveWorld-WPP combination. "In the world of WPP we are in the company of giants whose shared common goals of building brands and customer relationships align closely with our own. We have the tools that will help everyone win."

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