

A Brand Apart

Martin Roll



In his much lauded book, *Asian Brand Strategy*, Martin Roll writes, “Today, businesses and consumers are placing increasing importance on brands. Brands give a sense of identity, stimulate the senses, and enrich life experiences. People have a need to affiliate and surround themselves with things they know well, trust, and aspire to be.”

A thought leader, facilitator, mentor, and advisor to boardrooms and business executives, Martin Roll is an internationally recognized business strategist. He is a Senior Advisor to McKinsey & Company, a panelist and speaker at global conferences, an accomplished professor at Singapore’s Nanyang Business School, and a frequent guest lecturer at INSEAD and several other global business schools. Much of his own personal brand has been about delivering consistently reliable advice and building trust with his clients.

“Authenticity is an important characteristic to have,” says Roll. “You just have to be yourself and hopefully that’s what clients get. When I talk about authenticity—high level of quality and high level of confidence, these are what I try to bring to clients.”

Roll speaks extensively about the value of strong brands in today’s constantly changing market, specifically in Asia.

FlySpaces: What attracted you to grow and focus your career in Asia?

Martin Roll: My attraction to the region grew throughout the 90s when I worked in and out of touch with Europe, and served several multinational clients... I dealt a lot in Asia, and it was a very different planet. It was very ancient. There was the Asian financial crisis. And nobody talked about China.

I have never followed the crowd, never followed the mainstream. For example, when everyone went to join McKinsey in London, or went to private agencies in Silicon Valley, you could be absolutely sure I would go the other way. People thought I was crazy and were saying, “What the heck are you going to do in Asia?” I said I was going to work. People didn’t believe me. They thought I was going on some kind of poetic beach holiday. Now they’ve all come together and said I made the right choice.

“Be daring and be different.”

- Martin Roll

Business and Brand Strategist,
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FS: How has the Asian market changed since your company launched in 2001?

MR: It has become much more solid. I think Asia has grown up. It used to have a sort of inferiority complex—and it still kind of does. Anything that comes from the other side—tech from Germany, dreams from Hollywood... It was very understated when I came here. But Asia today is a very modern and contemporary place. It’s a very ancient and old place full of traditions, but has been modernized at the same time. Asia is starting to gain its own strengths and personality. It’s shaped up in so many areas and is still continuing to change.

FS: What are your predictions for the Asian market?

MR: I think it's going to move forward. It is in no way done yet. It's going to modernize even further. When it comes to regulatory affairs, I think it's extremely important for Asian countries to work together. Asia used to be a bunch of isolated nations and states. I think that in an era of globalization, collaboration and co-creation, it's very important that Asia keeps those frameworks and makes sure that they work together well. For example, ASEAN.

One thing that Asia should never become is arrogant and complacent. But it does happen and is a natural thing to happen when you become successful, almost like a science.

FS: How would you differentiate brand strategy in Asia?

MR: There are two ways to look at this.

One: Asian brands moving overseas. There's too much of this aspiration to become brands mimicking their Western counterparts (like Apple, IBM, etc.) I think it's very important for Asia to find its own voice. It's very important for it to have confidence to bring Asia to the world and not only replicate and become another, for example, mobile brand that looks just like the other one.

Two: Western brands coming into Asia. They also need to adapt (I call it "globalize"), and bring in some sort of global offering. Asian consumers are very fickle, so these Western brands should have a deep understanding of Asian market traits, strengths, and weaknesses. These are very important. Western brands have to make Asia their home. You can't just replicate a strategy and bring it here to Asia. It varies by industry and context.

FS: What would be your chief advice for startups trying to establish themselves in their industries?

MR: They should seek to build a brand identity and establish what they stand for very early. Most of them inherently do so, but in my experience they somehow get started a little too late. I think it's important in the early years that they even out the foundation to try and—I would say—dream big, in the sense of where they really want to be.

Get started early. I ask my clients very often, "What do you want your legacy to be?" It's an angle where you try to force people into a relation 5 to 10 years out. Working with branding and marketing strategy at a very early stage is quite important to get that going. This is not about big budgets. This is more about making sure everything you do—

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tactics, touch points, formality, and communication through all lines, where that goes, people, whatever you can imagine—is aligned.

FS: What's next for you?

MR: To continue my journey. My client roster is very diverse—half of them are in Asia and half are global in other locations. My next frontier is about family business. I realize that 70% of Asian firms are family owned, so I think my next book will be on family businesses how to transform a family business, and how to transform for the next generation.

FS: Your final message?

MR: Be daring and be different.

