

Agency for Change Podcast: Tom Reese, Retired, Reese & Associates

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Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

I absolutely love having a career in advertising. It is the perfect blend of art, theater and business, and in this line of work you get to learn about a variety of topics and invent new ways to get people to respond. Today I get to talk with someone who had a long and fulfilling career in advertising. He describes himself as a lucky guy, and I think he lived the American dream. He's also celebrating a big milestone life event. Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Tom Reese, formally of Reese & Associates, and now retired, getting ready for a big birthday celebration. Tom, welcome to the podcast.

Tom Reese:

Well, I thank you. It's a pleasure to be talking to you.

Lyn Wineman:

I can't imagine there's anything unhappy in your neck of the woods at this point. It sounds lovely in Florida. Tom, would you please introduce yourself to our listeners? What should they know about you and how would you describe yourself?

Tom Reese:

Well, I'll describe myself as a lucky guy. I graduated from high school in 1951 and it was right during the period of the Korean War. At the time I had a job offer, but because the draft was operating at that time, so I went and a couple of my friends, we went down and joined the Navy, and I ended up being assigned to an American destroyer and spent two years in that destroyer. The Korean War ended, and I got reassigned to NATO headquarters, a high-power international security force supreme allied command forces. I was assigned to the public relations in that command. That was my first big experience in the world of communications.

I had a very interesting boss. My boss was a commander and was recon from the second World War into the Korean War zone, and he had been a professor at Hannaford University and was a communications and English major teaching, and also was the Navy advisor for the movie ,The Broadman. He kept jumping on me whenever he had a chance. "Tom, you got to get yourself out of this Navy. Go and get to college and become something important."

In the meantime, I learned a lot of things about the communication. Anyway, I was inspired about college. Started making my plans and I ended up, of course, I had the GI bill coming to me, and so I

headed to a junior college in Pennsylvania. Spent two years there receiving an associate degree. Then after a lot of checking and review, I ended up in Boston University to get a Bachelor of Science degree. That was my key, my door opener to the communication world. Left me with about half of what I needed to get through college, so I worked my way, I got a job at Boston University, lucky. Between the GI bill and the working at the school, I ended up leaving the college with very little debt, not like some of the kids today.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh yeah.

Tom Reese:

Anyway, then in 1959, the job market was... But again, I was lucky guy, and I had some nice offer, The Hamilton Watch Company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as a marketing trainee. Well, during the time I was at Hamilton I worked with a lot of different agencies, big ones out of New York, small of the region. After the 13 years and a wonderful career at Hamilton, I had an opportunity for a job offer from an advertising agency that worked with us to become an account executive for them to work on inductor of products account, and the products that they had to offer. This was a family-owned agency with 130 to 150 employees, varied at the time. I spent 10 years as account executive to a senior vice president of account services. It was a very eye opening experience, really enjoyed it very much.

During that time my reputation in the community grew. A client of ours came to me and said, "Tom, all the calls I'm making as a small agency, and he would like to grow but he needs someone with your experience to get better with him and get this agency moving along." Several months negotiating with this young man, and we got together, and I joined him in the small agency which was primarily consumer products at the time. In joining that company, I did not have a compete clause with the agency that I was working with. Very easy for me to leave that business and into his operation. My job with him was to take part ownership as we grew.

Lyn Wineman:

Tom, first of all I want to say, thank you for your service. I also want to say it sounds like you have lived the American dream. I love that story. I'm curious, when you ended up taking over the agency, and it eventually became Reese & Associates, talk to me about that decision. Did you always want to have your own firm?

Tom Reese:

Well, as a kid that grew up in a blue-collar family, it was never a thought in my mind that I would have position. After I learned a lot about running a company, and especially with my 10 years that I spent with that other, which was a family-owned agency at the time, I felt capable that I could certainly do the job. Then with the backing of some financial people, and my accounting group, I felt very comfortable in going ahead and becoming an owner. I didn't get the dream in my mind, probably with the family-owned agency, that I felt I was now ready to run a company by myself.

That company was making a lot of mistakes in dealing with its employees and dealing with its clients. They weren't closing. How the owner and his sons ended up running the business, and they had no idea how to run the business, and then they fired the guy of the business to get out of their way. It was a poor situation. Anyway, I felt that I learned a lot about their mistakes, which I came to the point of having to run my own, those mistakes. Very comfortable that I could go ahead, and I did. I had the company for 25, 26 years. That was a dream that came late.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. That's fantastic. I love that story. Tom, I was introduced to you by your son, Kevin, who is a friend of mine. I'm curious, as a person who was running their own agency, you must have been a pretty busy guy. How did you balance work and family at that time?

Tom Reese:

Well, when I took over the agency... I traveled a lot, first of all. In my younger days with corporate life, I traveled tremendously. It was tough on my kids, and my wife did a good job of keeping them under control. The Reese & Associates agency, I didn't travel as much, at least overnight. It was a lot of daytime traveling, but I could get those and occasional sales meetings that I would attend. Anyway, I got along with them well and, I guess I can get at this point, Keven, he joined right from college. He came to me and said he would like to come to the agency. I said, "No way, Jose. You go out and get yourself a job and experience before you do that." Anyways, he got a job at a battery company. He worked for them for a while, a couple years in fact.

Then he was offered something, I think it was in the Midwest where he was offered a territory as a salesman. He liked it. Well while he was there, he was offered another job in California. Went to there, got married, and then he and his wife decided they'd come back east. He came back and he said, "Now I got some experience. How about I come to the agency?" He did, came to the agency and worked on primarily the battery companies, because we had a couple of them, knew a lot about that business. He and his wife, they lived about 40 miles from our agency. He commuted daily.

After a few years, they got fed up commuting and they wanted to stay in the Philadelphia market. I just said, "With you living 40, 50 miles away, get involved with this agency in long range." He and his wife decided to move out west and moved to Colorado, where he is today and has been there a long time. It was a good experience, happy departure, because he started his own career and own agency and the fact that he got into Colorado.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great.

Tom Reese:

Then after I bought, yeah, the company from my partner, I think who was working at the time, let's see... my daughter joined the agency, but she came out the hospital for about 10 years, and in the capacity where she'd call on industry and was a fundraiser for the hospital. She left there and went to a college that she had graduated from and worked for a couple years, and wasn't happy with the president of that place. When I bought the agency, "There's a place for you in the agency, so time to join us." She came and joined us and she took public relations and developing community relations for us, step as we move forward in grove. She came in.

Well then, she ended up retiring from the company. The other one, the oldest daughter, she wanted a part time job, so she did work for us until she finally got married and moved away. That was her career in the agency. Finally, the youngest daughter did not want that. Anyway, those three were there. We all enjoyed the agency, but we didn't talk business at the dining room table, talking about all the problems at the agency when we were trying to eat. That was a rule that we continued with. We talked all we could of the agency and not carry it through every night.

Lyn Wineman:

That sounds like a great rule. As an agency owner myself, my two daughters work for KidGlov, and we have to have the same rule because the rest of our family really didn't want to hear us talk about work all the time when we get together for dinner or family time.

Tom Reese:

Right, because it's bad enough-

Lyn Wineman:

Yes, it's bad enough during the day. One constant in the world of advertising is that everything seems to always be changing, and marketing has changed so much probably in the last several years. I'm curious what were some of the hot trends in advertising during your career?

Tom Reese:

Well, the biggest thing running the agency was computerization and bringing it into the agency from entirely handwork to computer work. The biggest thing was the art department.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Tom Reese:

Having an artist go from the board to the computer. In fact, we lost a couple of people who wouldn't do it. Of course, it gave us so much control and so much accuracy and everything. The speed in which we did things was... The agency previously that I worked, just to say this, we were lucky if we got five ads produced from Monday through Friday, full method of having to go through the development and the art, the copy and setting the top and then getting approved and read. It was Friday before we got to see anything.

We were knocking out five ads in a day, and that was because everything was... It brought control from the financial part of it to the production part of it, to every facet of it as we finally got the entire agency onto computers. The billing and the creative production, whatever. It was a tremendous changeover from the days of pencil work. I can remember waiting for billing far beyond the monthly closers. Now we could almost look every day at where we stood with the billing, pull up a job and people say, "Oh how much do we have in this particular job?" It used to take us a week to figure out when we were doing pencil work and then with computerization, we could do it in a couple of minutes. That was the biggest thing I think that happened in the agency work. Our profit structure really changed.

I had three departments. I had a financial person, a creative person, and an account management person, three vice presidents. Then we had everyone in the agency report to one of those divisions and took that where I could concentrate more and grow, visit with clients and spend more time on client work rather than worry of petty things that people have in the firm or the agency. It was a good changeover and helped us in our growth picture, more than anything else that I can think of. Does that answer your question?

Lyn Wineman:

It does and you took me back, because when I started my career in advertising a little over 30 years ago, I remember things switching over to technology, but my first job was as an agency runner. I would go to the type-house every day and get the type and then somebody would cut it up and literally paste it onto

a board. If you made a mistake, you had to go get more type. There were people that were really good about taking words apart and putting them together, where now that can all be done in minutes, if not seconds.

Tom Reese:

Yeah. That took time. We almost lost a day going back and forth getting the type from that guy.

Lyn Wineman:

Yep. Tom, what do you think makes advertising such a great career to be in?

Tom Reese:

You have to say that back in the old days, because now I'm very confused in the advertising world today and all the social media. Boy I'm sure glad that I'm out of it. To me it was extremely rewarding from the standpoint of doing things that made our clients happy.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Tom Reese:

When our clients were happy, we were all happy. Then when you do a great PR program or a great ad and the thing is successful, the company is successful and the product you're selling, that was my biggest reward, is the knowing that we did a job, did a job, people came back time after time. We ended up with probably on the average about 100 clients a year. We went up a little bit and down a little bit, but we had... I would say it was the old 80/20 rule. Twenty of those gave us 80% of the business. We had some big clients. All kinds of clients from industrial clients, banks which were wonderful. Very diverse. We really were across the board and that part... Even that we were nominated for the small business, the Chamber of Commerce in the community gave us the award as the Small Business of the Year Award in one of the years. We were pleased with our recognition.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. Tom, is there anything you wish you'd done differently in your career?

Tom Reese:

One of the things that I wished that I didn't do was that I established a ESA program in the business, in the Reese business.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Tom Reese:

That was probably most expensive and poorest decision, because it cost so much to set it up and I thought it would be... We had a nice retirement program, and I thought that would be, to have, but it turned out to be trouble when I went to sell the business because, but that was probably the worst one that I made personally, was operational in the agency.

Lyn Wineman:

It sounds like you had a pretty good path. If that was your biggest mistake, I think you did have a lucky life, a good life. It sounds like you worked hard, you took care of your clients and your people, and you made good decisions, which I think is always a good formula for success. Tom, I want to switch gears because I hear you've got a big milestone coming up in March. Can you tell us what that is?

Tom Reese:

Yes. I'll be 90 years old March 4th.

Lyn Wineman:

Well, congratulations.

Tom Reese:

Looking forward to it.

Lyn Wineman:

I hope someone's planning a big party for you.

Tom Reese:

Well yeah, it was a big secret, but I understand now that everybody is talking. In fact, yes, it's going to be, just a matter of who's coming and who's not and the list, and my wife has a lot of her friends on there instead of mine, but we'll get that straightened out.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm curious is there anything on your bucket list, Tom, that you're looking to accomplish?

Tom Reese:

My wife, she's not going to like it, but we traveled extensively. I don't have any real desire to travel anymore. It becomes so difficult from the standpoint of getting through airports. I just hope that I can remain healthy and continue to have fun, still play some golf, eat a lot, drink a lot, have a lot of parties. That's pretty much the way I see it. I don't see... We've been to Alaska, times we've been to the Caribbean, but we've traveled, in fact I can't think of any place to go at this point. I had a lot of people say, "Oh here I got to travel before I go." I've been to all of them. It's really hot. Just I should stay healthy and keep kicking.

Lyn Wineman:

I like that. I really like that. I'm going to ask you my favorite question next, because you have such an inspiring story. Can you give us an original quote, an original Tom Reese quote to inspire our listeners?

Tom Reese:

Get up early in the morning and go to bed early in the night and that's pretty much a success story to me. I would hope that in the next couple of years that we get some leadership that's worthy and that the nation starts backing them. Then get advertising or public relations program where we get everybody,

but relationship between our government and our population, because it just keeps going apart. That bothers me.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Tom Reese:

The lack of trust between people and the government. It's never a day that there isn't something new and crazy that's happening. If I had a wish, I wish that we come together to some degree and move forward as a nation. We'll see. I don't know. People going a lot of different directions.

Lyn Wineman:

We'll see. That is a fantastic wish. On that note, I'm going to say thank you. Thank you for taking time to tell your story. As an agency owner and an advertising professional myself, I found it very inspiring. Tom, I think the world needs more people like you. I just want to close by wishing you a very, very happy 90th birthday in March.

Tom Reese:

Thank you.

Announcer:

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