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What Houston needs is an image overhaul

By **LISA GRAY** Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle
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Johnny Knight JOHNNY KNIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY
Author and marketing consultant Patricia Martin is enthusiastic about Houston's future.

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headquarters of the world's petroleum industry. In this era of global warming and disappearing fossil fuels, Martin says, that's not the image you want. It's an "anxiety brand."

Anxiety brands play to consumers' uncertainty or fear. Hillary Clinton made herself into an anxiety brand, portraying herself as the seasoned, known candidate, less frightening than her (then) unknown competitor. The result was about what Martin would have predicted: effective at first but not long-term. People don't like anxiety brands.

Martin suggests that Houston could instead become a "compassion brand," known for its friendliness and big heart. When Hurricane Katrina showcased that side of our civic personality, people in other cities were surprised — just as they're surprised, once they get here, to discover Houston's openness to newcomers and its easy racial diversity. We could be known for our niceness — a city akin to Minneapolis, a brand like Kleenex or Dove soap.

Alternately, and more powerfully, we could be an "idea brand," a brand that seems magically new and transformative. The iPhone is an idea brand, says Martin, and so is Barack Obama.

But if Houston became an idea brand, what would its idea be?

All kinds of energy

Stop being the Oil City, Martin urges. Instead, be the Energy City.

Trumpet Houston's pioneering work in new technologies, such as solar and wind power. At the same time, talk about the other kinds of energy that animate the city. Let the world know about the Art Car Parade, about the Menil, about the opera and ballet and Discovery Green. Encourage the city's art scene to grow. Show the world that, while other cities see their economies are drooping, we remain vital — a place where new ideas can fly, new companies can thrive. Make Houston a place where energetic people want to spend their lives.

"Houston has a story to tell," Martin says. "And that makes it powerful as a brand."

The problem, of course, is making the transition — of moving from fossil fuels to other energies, of throwing out old ideas about our city and learning new ones.

I'm not convinced that we're about to enter a new renaissance. But I do think that, in five or 10 years, the world could see Houston in a much more favorable light. And so could we.

Patricia Martin gives a great PowerPoint presentation. Last week, as she faced a Greater Houston Partnership lunch crowd, giant twin versions of her graphics glowed on screens to either side of her, but the crowd's attention focused mainly on Martin herself.

An intense woman, she speaks with the fervor of an infomercial host.

Martin, a high-powered marketing consultant, has worked with clients such as the New York Philharmonic, Animal Planet, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems. She writes commentaries for Adweek and Advertising Age. Last week, she and her PowerPoint presentation were here to sell her ideas about how Houston should market itself.

She spent a good bit of time explaining her idea that we are about to experience a renaissance much like the one that birthed Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. The Renaissance Generation — or the RenGen, as Martin prefers to brand it — seems plausible when you're in her magnetic presence. Of course we're in a time of great upheaval. Of course we're casting aside ideas that no longer work and trying to forge something new.

But away from Martin, the RenGen arguments seem thin, the analogy stretched way past its breaking point. Are we really supposed to think that global warming equals the bubonic plague? Or that the Internet equals roads built by Imperial Rome? And how can a "generation" — even one labeled a "psychographic," whatever that is — somehow stretch from high school students all the way up to the AARP? Where's the Ren? Where's the Gen?

With Martin's ideas, we need to do what she says the RenGen would do: throw out the ones that don't work and build on the ones that do.

Houston's brand

Martin is at her best talking not about history and sociology, but about the stuff she really knows: marketing. Right now, she says, Houston's brand is in trouble.

The world thinks of us (and with reason) as a city built on oil, the headquarters of the world's petroleum industry. In this era of global warming and disappearing fossil fuels, Martin says, that's not the image you want. It's an "anxiety brand."

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