

Guard change at research firm

Veteran ad man takes over at SIR

BY BOB RAYNER
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

In an easy-to-miss little building on West Broad Street, they've spent nearly four decades collecting, massaging and interpreting the kind of knowledge that changes people's lives — including yours, more than likely.

Over the years, the folks at the Southeastern Institute of Research discovered that consumers might actually use bank-issued credit cards, that

people liked the idea of cooking their turkeys in a plastic bag, and that Virginia is, of course, for lovers.

Across the street and a couple of blocks east of the Science Museum of Virginia, the firm doesn't usually delve into the deepest mysteries of human existence or scientific inquiry.

But since its founding in 1964, SIR has developed a national reputation for providing first-rate marketing research.

So when Reynolds Metals started selling cooking bags, when Bank of Virginia was pondering a new type of credit card and when the Old Dominion was looking for a snappy tourism slogan, they all turned to SIR for the data they needed to make decisions.

The local firm has worked for clients near and far: from the Richmond Symphony, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Owens & Minor Inc., to Citicorp, Coca-Cola and the National Kidney Foundation.

"We've been on the forefront of other companies' innovations," said Bob Miller, who became one of SIR's owners in 1969, along with Richard Steele.

Their company has conducted more than 10,000 studies — using survey research and focus groups — that test everything from consumer attitudes about cell phones and automated teller machines to audience satisfaction for the Richmond Forum.

SIR is entering a new phase this summer. Miller and Steele are ready to begin easing out of the business. Miller will retire in October. They've sold a controlling stake in the company to a couple of younger, but very experienced, marketing executives.

Since 1964, the institute has gained a national reputation for first-rate marketing research.

Martin is adamant about maintaining the firm's franchise as a major-league research organization.

John Martin, the former president of Siddall, has taken over as president and chief executive at SIR.

After leaving the Richmond ad agency in 2000, Martin spent 3½ years heading the marketing team at PBM Products, the Gordonsville firm that is transforming the baby-formula industry with its low-priced store brands.

Elizabeth McLaughlin, who was PBM's vice president of sales, has signed on as chief operating officer at SIR, which has 14 employees.

Martin sees a chance to expand the research company's reach by stretching its solid reputation for producing reliable, timely information.

Miller and Steele "did a great job building this company," Martin said, who worked with SIR at Siddall and PBM. "They trained a lot of people in Richmond who are in this business. And they're very much gentlemen's gentlemen."

The next step, he said, is designed to bring more value to the firm's customers.

"I want to see us evolve more and more into a marketing consulting business, providing our clients with actionable recommendations based on research."

That means delivering not only reliable data, but also suggestions about how to turn that information into an effective communications strategy.

"Traditional research companies feel a little challenged when they step outside of saying: Here's what the survey said."

Martin also wants to connect his firm's clients

with marketing pros who can help them execute their plans.

"I want to begin leveraging strategic partnerships. My marketing experience has been in bringing third parties to the table who can add value for clients."

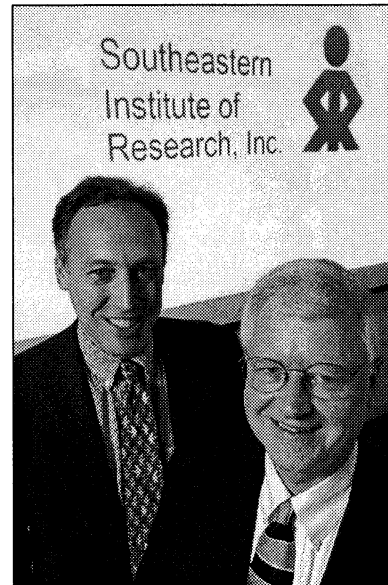
He has also streamlined some of the research operations, arranging an outsourcing deal for

the call center on Clay Street that had been managed by SIR.

But Martin is adamant about maintaining the firm's franchise as a major-league research organization.

"Our core technology is thinking."

The company's success didn't always come easily.



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

Veteran ad executive John Martin (left) has taken over the reins at SIR. Bob Miller (right), the current president, is retiring in October.

Steele, who began working for SIR in 1965, remembers searching the library to find out-of-town telephone books that he could flip through to create random samples for surveys.

He talks about using a trailer to drag the prototype of an early ATM machine from county fair to county fair. And he recalls the days when telephone researchers had to worry about respondents with party lines and small towns where all the calls went through a central operator.

"You didn't know if you were getting the right person," he said. And getting the right person is a very big deal if you're a meticulous survey researcher.

Today, the concerns at SIR are more likely to focus on ways to construct reliable Internet surveys or methods for dealing with the spread of telephone answering machines.

But the goal remains the same: reliable information that might not change the world but might just change the way you cook a turkey.

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