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BY MICHAEL KRAUSS

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A True Utility Player

"The energy space is changing, and we're changing the way people think about and use energy," says Karen Jones, senior vice president and CMO of Reliant Energy, the Houston-based subsidiary of integrated power generation and retail electricity company NRG Energy Inc.

Recognized as a "Marketer of the Year" in 2005 by *BtoB* magazine for her rebranding work at DHL, Jones also spent 15 years in increasingly senior positions at Compaq and HP. She could work anywhere as a CMO, but she sees the energy production, distribution and retailing business as the hottest place for marketers today.

"Reliant is at the forefront. We're innovating towards new forms of energy and providing customers with tools to learn about their energy consumption," such as weekly e-mails describing customers' energy consumption, she says. "We're striving to be innovative. Now you can have solar on your rooftop with an electric vehicle charging infrastructure in your house. The rooftop powers the charging device overnight so that you can drive your car to work the next day."

"We're in solar, electric vehicle charging, wind power and nuclear. We're cleaning up coal plants to become cleaner facilities. Many of our markets have become competitive, though not every state is deregulated. It is important to provide innovative solutions to your portfolio. We're not just a power generator anymore," she says. "We've become very dynamic."

Jones is working at the heart of creating that dynamic change, which includes signing deals with NFL teams including the Washington Redskins, and the New York Jets and Giants to provide solar power at FedEx Field and MetLife Stadium. Reliant also has established a pact with the Philadelphia Eagles to provide an integrated solar and micro-wind turbine green energy solution at Lincoln Financial Field. "We're giving the stadiums enough renewable energy to run on game day," Jones says. "Typically, the sponsors at these stadiums are the beverage and consumer products companies. We're breaking new ground for the energy industry." (Extending its reach within the NFL, Reliant also owns the naming rights for the Houston Texans' stadium.)

Jones wanted to draw attention to her residential solar power offering, so she decided to try to create a new Guinness World Record for the most people wearing sunglasses in the dark. Reliant gave free sunglasses to each attendee at a Texas Rangers night game. Rangers owner and pitching ace Nolan Ryan and former President George W. Bush participated. A video of Ryan and Bush donning sunglasses in the dark went viral, Jones



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KAREN JONES, *Reliant Energy*

says. "There aren't a lot of energy companies with as many Facebook fans as we have," she says. She's avid about social media as a marketing tool for connecting with customers and repositioning the company.

One of Jones' priorities at Reliant is to reposition and rebrand the company as a more forward-thinking, contemporary organization—"not your father's Oldsmobile," she says. "When I joined two years ago, our CEO, David Crane, purchased a number of consumer-facing retail electricity companies. Combine that with our push into new forms of energy and we really needed to rebrand the organization."

Working with Landor Associates, Jones developed a new logo (left) and corporate image. "Our use of color represents the diversity of the company. The plus signs signal we're positive and enthusiastic about energy. We're trying to be aspirational and take on a new, innovative look," she says.

Initially, the operations personnel didn't like the pink color in one of the pluses, but Jones has won them over. The new logo now adorns Reliant Stadium and FedEx Field, and it will be prominent in other stadiums where Reliant negotiates power deals.

Jones is a marketing generalist who applies the right marketing tools and techniques given the challenges facing the business. She has led pricing initiatives, handled new product development, and worked on channel marketing assignments and product distribution programs. But, she says, "Creating a brand that employees

can embrace is the most meaningful and challenging work that I've done."

Jones is known in the industry as a developer of talent. She shares some guidance for aspiring marketers. "You need to constantly ask for more. I was never satisfied knowing one portion of marketing. I always wanted to learn more. I was on a quest to make myself a rounded-out marketer. I wanted to master all aspects and phases of marketing. People won't know that that's what you want unless you open up your mouth and speak," she says. "People get pigeonholed. He's the pricing person. She's the advertising person. He's the channel distribution person. You have to manage your aspirations and let people know what you want to do. You also have to be responsible and accountable for what you're given. If you can't deliver on what you've been asked to do, it is hard for people to trust you and give you more."

Jones cautions not to be in too big of a hurry. "There is a rite of passage in marketing. It takes time. Ultimately, you can get to the senior leadership role." First, you have to lay a strong foundation, she says. "My biggest challenge was around the financial side of the business. I tell marketing students to learn how to read a balance sheet, learn the financial side. Be sure to take an accounting and a finance class in school, not just marketing."

Listening to Jones, I think I'd take marketing, communications, finance and engineering if I were in school today. That's a formula for leadership in today's dynamic marketplace. **m**

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