

ING used to be a Dutch bank, not any more.

Conferring ING with global brand status

In 2007 ING's investment in Formula One will be second only to Marlboro. It is an incredible debut for a committed sponsor who recognised that in the end Formula One was its only true solution to a real life global marketing problem. And sponsorship director Isabelle Conner is making new rules as ING becomes a true global brand.

By David Cushnan Photographs by Graham Fudger

There are several ways for a new sponsor to enter Formula One. Some companies opt to test the waters with a small deal before increasing their involvement over time; others make a bigger impact with a major deal. However, finance giant ING has gone further still by becoming title sponsor of the world champion team, investing in trackside branding at 14 of the 17 races and being title sponsor of a race for good measure. Formula One has hardly seen its like since Marlboro burst into the sport in the 1970s.

No surprise then that ING has assigned one of its top marketing executives to run its Formula One programme. American-born Isabelle Conner was previously head of marketing for ING's private bank and brings with her more than 20 years of marketing experience in the international finance sector. Conner freely admits that before taking up her new role she knew little, if anything, about Formula One, but, inevitably, she is a quick learner – just like her brand. She may have a lot to learn about the sport, but few in the paddock will be able to match her

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marketing knowledge and experience. She's not a petrolhead, but the way she talks after only a few months in the job, one might be excused for getting the opposite impression: "It's incredibly exciting," she says of her early Formula One experiences. "Personally I find it absolutely fascinating and the more I learn about it the more I find it fascinating. Everything I've done in the last 20 years has brought me here today."

Originally from New York, Conner has spent much of her career managing the marketing strategies for several major financial organisations, including Deutsche Bank and Prudential Securities. After becoming Deutsche's head of international marketing for private banking, she decided to leave New York and move to Europe in 2003 to join ING.

ING began seriously considering Formula

One around a year ago when it realised its brand recognition didn't match its financial performance. Conner explains: "The board was looking at the results of the organisation. We are one of the largest financial services organisations in Europe and in the top 15 globally. We have very healthy profits and a number of clients that love us – 60 million around the world in 50 markets. And yet there was a bit of a disconnect between all of that and the awareness in the market of what ING actually did. That was what the board set about to understand: what could be done to rectify that? What could bring the brand more in line with results?"

The ING board quickly decided that sponsorship, specifically sports sponsorship, was the answer and set about a rigorous analysis of as many as 10 different sports over a six-month period. Conner takes up the story: "ING looked at sports like tennis, soccer, golf, track and field, basketball and the Olympics. There was a period of elimination because there were certain sports that were unavailable, like soccer until 2014. There were others that did not reach the

demographics that we wanted to go after. Certain sports, like athletics, just didn't give us the TV coverage." ING eventually came up with a shortlist of three sports: tennis, Formula One and the Olympics, although the latter was quickly ruled out. "The Olympics is really for brands that are already well known, like Visa and Coca-Cola."

If Formula One was the answer then it quickly decided it would only countenance entering the sport with a top team. The choice predictably came down to Ferrari, McLaren and Renault. "It was again pretty straightforward," recalls Conner. "Ferrari said the car was staying red and McLaren said we could put some logos on but they would be black on silver. Renault said they were very open to working with us: Mild Seven was leaving, they hadn't redesigned

the car in seven years so it was a great opportunity. Then the more we talked, culturally there was just a huge fit between the two organisations. If you look at their brand, it is very approachable and offers value for money – it had a lot of the brand values that ING stands for as well." The tennis option was quickly discounted as enthusiasm grew for a deal with Renault.

Having been rubber-stamped by the board, the three-year deal with Renault was officially announced on Monday 16th October. Dutch sponsorship agent Mick De Haas orchestrated the deal and kept it a secret until it leaked out only a few weeks before it was announced, a remarkable achievement in itself.

Although neither Conner nor ING will comment on the value of the sponsorship, it is generally regarded that the company is paying Renault something in the region of US\$55 million a year, making it probably the biggest non-tobacco sponsorship agreement in Formula One history.

Despite the results on the track thus far, Conner is clearly delighted with how the relationship has begun. "It didn't hurt they were world champions, but the team were just very easy to work with," she says. "Now we are six months into it, it has just been a pleasure to work with them. They are a group that is open to new ideas, very competent and professional as a group of people."

Forging a good working relationship with the team early into the deal was a top priority for Conner when she took up her role in charge of the programme in January this year. On the eve of the Malaysian Grand Prix she invited the whole Renault team, including the race drivers and mechanics, to an introductory party. Conner remembers it as an important moment, as she says: "We wanted to do that early on to show we're in it for the long term. It's very important if we're going to see each other every other weekend that we bond as a team and that's what I feel we've done." The Renault title deal, however, is only part of the ING investment in the sport. ING >



The decision to be a title rather than secondary sponsor was taken at the last minute. It meant ING could paint the car in its colours.

< has also become one of the biggest trackside sponsors, spending an additional sum thought to be as much as US\$20 million in the process. Its banners will appear at no fewer than 14 of the 17 races this season, which has already included the title sponsorship deal at the Australian Grand Prix in March. Conner says trackside placements were a natural extension of the Renault deal. "Once we'd decided to go into the sport, we had a couple of choices. The board looked at both, we did our research, analysed it and it makes perfect business sense. This is definitely the group of people we want to reach, so why not let them know that we're here."

Buying the exposure was one thing, but ING's board made a strategic decision to sanction the extra investment to successfully activate the deals. "That's really where you get the leverage," says Conner. "That's where we had the real issue at ING: certain people in certain parts of the world think of ING as an insurance company or a retail bank. That's the perception, for instance, in Asia, whereas in the US it's ING Direct – financial planning and retirement services. In the Netherlands, it's a definite retail bank. We went in with title sponsorship, so we're very visible. We buy the boards at 14 of the 17 races, which will further add to the visibility. But when somebody watches the ING lion logo on television, what are they thinking? The board allowed us to go out and tell the story beyond what we've done with on-car and on-track."

The central pillar of the activation strategy is a global advertising campaign.

Interestingly it is the first global campaign for the ING brand, as Conner reveals: "The firm was decentralised in its approach. Our businesses were promoting their services in local markets, but now we're aligning and channelling our efforts through a global television and media campaign."

ING's central broadcast campaign comprises 30 different global markets with 15 to 40 second spots designed by German advertising agency Kempertrautmann. The intention is to promote the similarities between the RenaultF1 team and ING by comparing the driver to the customer, each supported by a group of professionals. "We're on CNN five times a day in Europe

and Eastern Europe and Asia. That was another reason we liked the sport, because there are a lot of races happening in Asia now."

Conner has put together a team of three managers at ING's London office to coordinate and activate the sponsorship: Jon Tracey dealing with the media, Gabor Dani as head of advertising, marketing and tracking and Mark Maan, taking care of the events and hospitality strand. Conner says her team currently numbers around seven people with some interns. Indirectly, however, far more are involved: "Above and beyond that we've asked the six board members to appoint an F1 officer for their line of

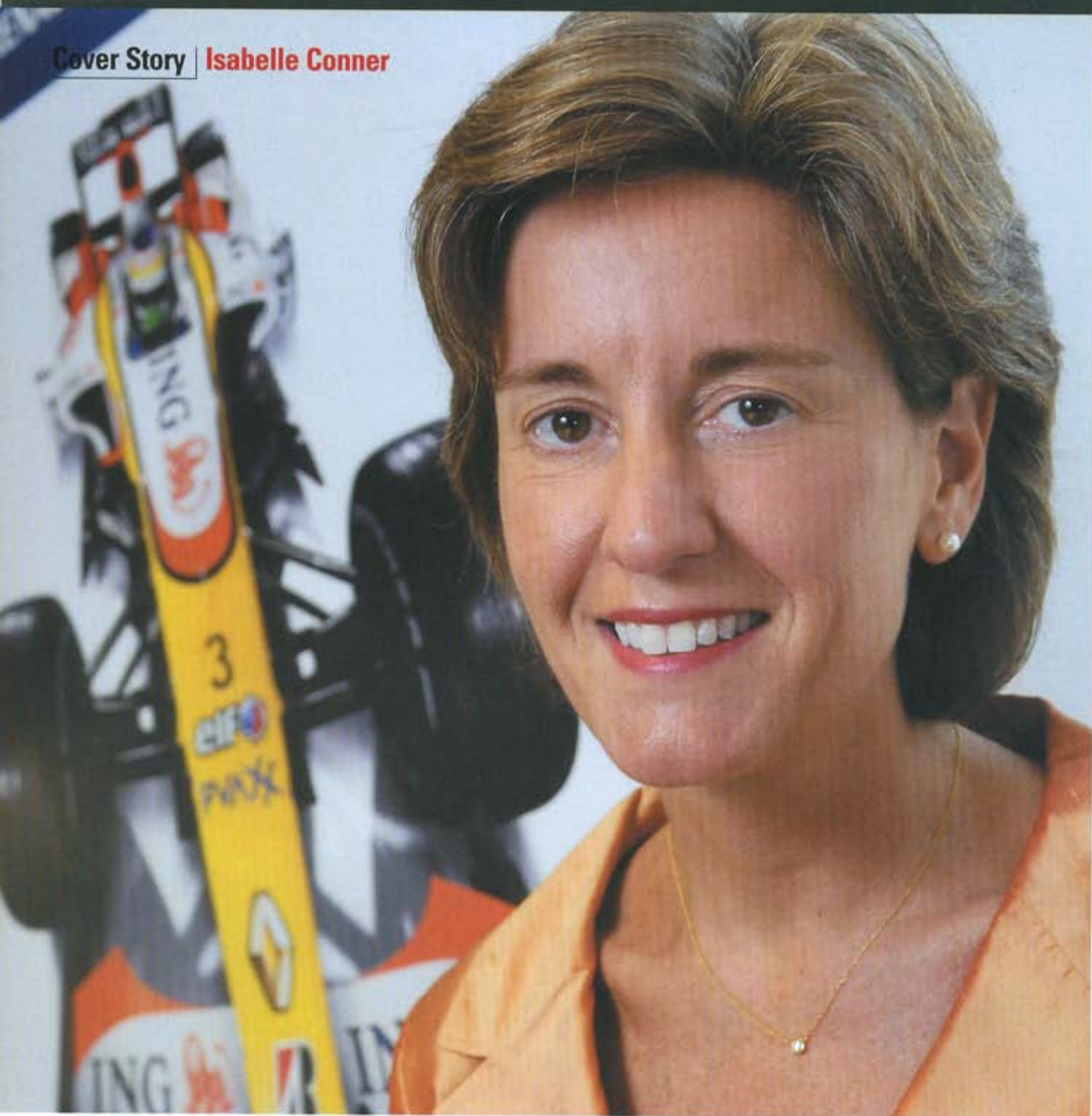
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and Asia, we're sponsoring broadcasts mostly around the race weekend. That's where we're focusing our media buying because that's where it makes the most sense. If an F1 fan is about to watch the race and see the 'ING' on-car branding, just before that he sees the commercial that tells him that ING is a global financial institution active in banking, insurance and asset management and that's the link we're trying to make. In year one those are the messages: it is truly an awareness campaign."

She adds: "If you look at the markets we're going after the focus for us is Central

the business – so the wholesale bank, retail bank, insurance Asia, insurance Americas insurance Europe and private banking each has a dedicated person. We have calls with those officers every other week to talk about everything happening centrally, locally and at the race track."

For each Grand Prix, ING has set up a project team, assembled from its staff in the area where the race is being held. They are charged with managing the local activation at every event. It is part of a wider strategy to make Formula One an integral company-wide project. "It's the first time people >



Isabelle Conner is an American who is launching a brand worldwide with Formula One as the campaign's spearhead.

< who have never spoken to each other at ING have come together. For Kuala Lumpur you could have somebody from the real estate business, someone from the wholesale bank and private banking all working towards that common ING goal, which is to get the brand up in Kuala Lumpur. After three years at ING that's what I'm most proud of."

ING's in-depth analysis of how best to promote its brand in the first place has quickly been matched by its diligent approach to tracking how effective the sponsorship is. "We did a zero measurement in 32 markets where we interviewed 500 people in each of those markets – some 15,000 individuals – to understand what the level of awareness was. Are you aware of ING's business? Are you aware ING is in Formula One? Which team is ING sponsoring? We're

going to do that same survey halfway through the season and again at the end of the year. That's important, just like the research to get into the sport was very intense. At the end of the race calendar

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those market-by-market numbers will dictate what year two and three will look like, but right now we're just too early into it [to predict]."

Conner provides an example of the total commitment to the project when she explains that the whole ING sponsorship team stays at each race venue until the Monday following the race, in order to carry out

a full debrief of the weekend's events. Even in the first three races, the debriefs have averaged five hours each. Conner believes it is all part of the company's learning experience. "Logistically, it's a huge thing," she

says. "Once the Grand Prix goes away it doesn't stop because then we start planning for the following year. I think now it's best practice." She is certainly aware that ING has entrusted her with a lot of cash, possibly US\$170 million in all, and she is determined to spend it wisely.

It was more research that prompted Conner to focus her efforts on the local >



The trackside hoardings are just as important to ING as the sponsorship of the Renault cars in the marketing programme.

< activation of the brand in each area. She studied previous examples of financial Formula One sponsors such as Credit Suisse, Allianz and HSBC. "I think we've taken what we can from that and are trying to do it in an even bigger and better way."

For a company like ING, which is active in 15 of the 17 Formula One host countries, local activation makes perfect sense. Conner certainly cannot be accused of not doing her

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homework on the subject, as she says: "I personally interviewed at least one hundred people in the industry and outside the industry just to understand what makes sports sponsorship successful. The key message that kept coming out was local activation and that's where I have to say we are succeeding because it's happening without much prodding."

"What has surprised me is that this has taken on and spread like wildfire throughout the company. People love it internally. What is even more spectacular is what the local businesses are doing. For example in Kuala Lumpur what I heard from everyone outside of ING is, 'ING, that's all we are seeing' because the local business took their exist-

ing campaign and for two months switched it to the F1 campaign. So all over downtown Kuala Lumpur you had billboards, signs everywhere, the monorail, the commercial was airing, they branded whole buildings with our car and team. When you parachute into a race city and see that kind of enthusiasm that was completely funded locally, then you see how we're going to make this sponsorship work."

Similarly keeping as many of ING's 117,000 employees informed about the sponsorship is another of Conner's early priorities. "We have to work out how to use this to build employee pride. How is this going to impact the recruiting we do because the financial services industry is all about talent and we really want to be one of the players with UBS, Credit Suisse, Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley. It's important to make sure we get and keep the best people."

Aside from simply raising the profile of the brand for the consumer, Conner is also well aware of the potential benefits to ING of business-to-business relationships through Formula One. "In the Paddock Club it's the

'wow' effect and that is really helping for two different parts of the business. It's not mass retail, it's private banking and wholesale clients and we entertain them there. That is working very well. Coming out of Kuala Lumpur and Bahrain we're very happy with the relationships we've formed."

While Renault's on-track results may have been disappointing in the opening three races of the year, Conner calls ING's brand awareness numbers thus far "spectacular". She adds: "I'm most interested in visibility and these are the hard numbers. What we are finding so far after three races is that we're the best, most visible brand out there, bar none. In Melbourne we were most visible because interestingly enough on television when you see our cars the logo is highly visible."

"We track it very carefully – one of my jobs is to report to the board how we're doing. Yes, it would be great if we were on the podium. The first three races it hasn't happened but we trust that Flavio [Briatore] will do what he needs to do. He's a seven times world champion, so he knows what he's doing."

"That's a part of our partnership – we do what we're good at and they do what they're good at and I'm confident everyone's going to come out a winner." If commitment is any guarantee of results, ING would appear to have little to worry about. BEU