

A Capstone Conversation With Bonnie Buol Ruszczyk



Bonnie Buol Ruszczyk
President
BBR Marketing



CAPSTONE MARKETING

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Hello, this is [Jean Caragher](#), President of [Capstone Marketing](#). I am very pleased to be talking today with [Bonnie Buol Ruszczyk](#), President of [BBR Marketing](#) and the 2014 [Association for Accounting Marketing](#) (AAM) Volunteer of the Year.

Bonnie formed BBR Marketing five years ago, and works with a variety of professional services firms. She has been in the creative and marketing services community for over 20 years, and writes and contributes to various publications and media, including [Social Media Today](#), [Accounting Today](#) and other industry-related publications. Bonnie is a founding member of the [Atlanta Independent Women's Network](#) and is the Atlanta Chapter President of the [Association for Accounting Marketing](#) where she has increased participation and the quality of the program for the chapter for local and regional participants.

Jean: Bonnie, congratulations on being named the 2014 [AAM](#) Volunteer of the Year.

Bonnie: Thank you very much. It's quite an honor.

Jean: Is it true that you weren't feeling well that night?

Bonnie: Here's the situation. I actually had the flu at the [AAM](#) Conference last year, and I was running a 100 or 101 degree fever just about the whole time. I went down to the event and was trying to make it through to hear some of the awards. I got down there, had a snack and a glass of wine and said, "I'm done." So, I went upstairs. Not ten minutes later I get a call from [Laura Snyder](#), who said, "Where are you?" to which I replied, "I'm in my yoga pants upstairs." She told me to come back down, and I told her no. So sadly, I was not there to actually get my award in person.

Jean: We'll have to give you another round of applause next year. That just wasn't fair that you weren't able to be acknowledged like that in person.

Bonnie: Oh, that was just fine. I'm honored by it.

Jean: Well, it's well deserved. Bonnie, you have lots of experience in accounting and in the professional services arena. What do you think is the greatest challenge in marketing CPA firms?

Bonnie: I think there are a number of challenges that they face, but I think one of the biggest ones that we come across is that CPA firms have a very hard time differentiating themselves. Therefore, the public at large see them all as interchangeable, and



somewhat the same. What's happening over time is that it starts commoditizing the industry. So, determining that differentiation or what sets them apart and what makes them special in their particular industry and then communicating that in a way that your audiences are going to really understand – that seems to be one of the biggest challenges that we see consistently with firms all around the country, regardless of size.

Jean: What do you think is the best way for CPA firms to go about that?

Bonnie: We have been trying to help firms do that for the last five years, and a lot of times it takes being very direct and very honest, getting partners in a room and asking a whole lot of questions about what it is that makes them different. Do they serve a particular industry? Are they the low price leader? That's not something that most people go after, but somebody has to own that space. If you do, you might as well go for it full force.

Do you have staff that has training that other firms don't have? A differentiator can be a wide variety of different things, but you can sell different. It's very hard to sell great. What I see is lots of firms trying to sell great, and yet haven't quite figured out what makes them different.

Jean: It's really digging in and doing the research that's necessary to figure out what that differentiator is?

Bonnie: Yes, absolutely, and getting buy in on that from all the partners, too. If that's the message that you're going to be going to market with, then everybody needs to be relatively comfortable with that and the idea of singing from the same songbook.

Jean: What changes have you noticed in accounting marketing over the past five years?

Bonnie: Let me see, five years ago was 2009. I think firms are more and more open to making marketing a part of their overall strategy and trying things that they may have shunned five to 10 years ago.

Jean: What would they have shunned before that you think they are open to now?

Bonnie: I'm seeing more and more firms on Twitter, and, of course, Twitter was fairly new five years ago. Firms are starting to be open to the idea of social media in general. Before it just seemed a silly thing for a professional firm to do and to not even bother with.

I'm seeing much more interesting bios on websites, or maybe it's just the firms we're working with, but they are more willing to show a little personality. They demonstrate that they are absolutely professional and incredibly well trained and knowledgeable



about what they do, but they also have families and hobbies and do things just like all the rest of us do. I'm seeing more humanizing of the providers in the industry.

Jean: They are more authentic, if you will.

Bonnie: Yes, I think so. All things being equal, people will choose to work with people they like, and especially on something that can be intense and personal. They are going to pick somebody that they have something in common with, or like the personality traits they are demonstrating. It can actually lead to a lot more business, as well.

Jean: Yes, because you all know that prospects are doing their research online for their CPA firms when they're going through that process. It's to a firm's benefit to have that more authentic or different types of information that prospects can review.

Bonnie: Absolutely; it makes sense.

Jean: We've talked about the prior five years, so if you look ahead to the next five years, what are your predictions for accounting marketing?

Bonnie: I think we're going to continue to see marketing playing a bigger and I hope more important role at firms. I think we're going to see a lot more smaller firms embracing some of the marketing tactics that the larger firms have been using for a long time. I think social media is going to continue to grow and become a factor. On the big scale I think those within firms that have business development and networking skills and can go out and bring in business are going to be and continue to be those that reach partner level quicker, and are recognized for those efforts.

I hope we see a lot more training on what is referred to as soft skills, among the various levels of staff within firms, so that marketing is out there doing their job. If business development isn't happening as well, then a lot of times those efforts are in vain. So making sure that the entire firm is on the same page and working toward the same goal.

Jean: In your experience, do you find that firms are providing their people with enough training? And, let me add something to that. Do you find the partners leading that effort, or do you see more of 'I've done that in my career, and now it's their turn to figure it out?'

Bonnie: I know exactly what you're talking about. I don't see as much training as I think we need in the industry. I have actually had conversations with some of the more senior partners who were like, "Well, I had to go out there and figure it out on my own, so they ought to be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and do it themselves."

But, when you're looking at the big picture, investing a little bit in trying to train the staff to have these broader skills that are going to bring in more business just makes sense;



things like how do you get the most out of LinkedIn. I actually led training a couple of years ago on what to do at a networking event, which for those of us in marketing seems like, well, of course, we know what to do at a networking event. People that have not done a lot of that, it really does help them realize the nerves that they're feeling are normal. This is how you can navigate the waters so that you get the most out of the experience without feeling horrible at the end of it, because you just had to sit in the corner.

I have seen some partners that have really gotten behind it, but I think most of the firms where I see good training going on, and programs like this in place, it tends to be spearheaded by either the marketing person or the firm administrator who sees the value and has gotten even reluctant buy-in to pay for whatever needs to be paid for. I'd love to see more partners get behind the whole idea.

Jean: What are the factors or skills that you think enable accounting marketers to be successful?

Bonnie: I think you have to have thick skin in some cases because a lot of times marketing is misunderstood. Marketing is not valued as much as it should be, and you spend a lot of time fighting some uphill battles.

I think you have to have a level of confidence where you know what you're talking about, and you can talk to partners, and a room full of partners, and be able to communicate your message in a way that they are going to understand and appreciate. A lot of that comes down to confidence, being able to say, yes, this is what the case is, and this is why, and this is what we need.

Another thing is we need to know the business. We need to understand. I'm not saying you need to go out and prepare a business' tax return. But we need to understand the terminology used in the business, how accounting firms make their money and how partnerships are set up, so that the strategic thinking that we put in place is based on the reality that these partners are living day to day.

Jean: In addition to the marketing skills that they need, they need those personal qualities as well, in order to be successful.

Bonnie: Yes.

Jean: Which of your personal skills do you think contributes most to your own success?

Bonnie: Wow! You know, I think some of it is, for better or worse, I have managed to communicate a certain level of confidence that firm partners seem to appreciate, or at least understand. But, honestly, I think one of the things is that my firm just celebrated its five year anniversary.



Jean: Congratulations.

Bonnie: Thank you.

Jean: That's a big deal.

Bonnie: It is, yes. Somebody sent me an article that said something like 17% of businesses make it to the fifth year. So, I poured myself a nice big glass of wine to celebrate that. But part of it is I have had good and bad experiences prior to starting this firm, and I wanted to make sure that I created an environment that was very honest. We're a laid back group of people and we communicate that way. We act that way. We send out Halloween cards rather than Christmas cards, our end of year holiday cards. Some people appreciate that and some people may find it a little bit campier or frivolous but we've managed to find that group of clients that really appreciate that level of honesty and direct communication. That's helped us get where we are today. Not everybody is going to love it, but we've found a lot that do, so that's very good.

Jean: Wonderful. What is your best piece of advice for accounting marketers?

Bonnie: I am going to go back to something I was saying before, find that level of confidence. Don't let others within the firm knock you down or make you question your abilities, your knowledge or your skills. I have seen this happen so often.

Have that level of confidence that you're bringing knowledge to the table that most of the people at the firm do not have. Present your ideas and stick to them as much as you can, because the rest of the firm, they're accountants. They are very good at what they do, they are very smart people but they are not marketers and they don't have the knowledge and the skills that you have. That's why you are there.

Jean: On the flip side, what is your best piece of advice for managing partners?

Bonnie: I'm going to flip that script and say, make sure that they are working with marketers that understand the industry. They give marketing the level of respect that it needs to really impact the firm. Sarah, who works on my team, had an article in *Accounting Today* that was all about giving marketing the respect that it deserves. Marketing should have a seat at partner meetings, or at least at firm management meetings. Include your marketing people or person in your strategic sessions, where you're thinking about where the firm wants to be in the next five years, because they are going to be a big part of reaching that goal and hopefully growing at the pace that you want.

Everybody has their specific areas of expertise and knowledge and where they can contribute, so be open to allowing the marketing person to contribute where they can.



Jean: Let me ask you, what level of marketer do you feel should be attending management or partner meetings?

Bonnie: I think it does need to be a senior marketer. That is a little bit of a challenge, because what happens is they hire somebody very young and green. They can definitely add something to the firm, but they're probably not going to have that level of experience that allows them to bring a strategic level of thinking. If you have a marketing director, or a C-level marketer at your firm, they've reached that level through many, many years of experience and hard work, and they can probably contribute a lot to the conversation.

Jean: Let me say that there's more to Bonnie than BBR Marketing. She enjoys spending time with her husband, and their two dogs, reading, writing, renovating her attic...I'd love to hear more about that one...cooking, and hanging out with friends. Word on the street is that she throws a mean party. Bonnie, let me ask you, what was the best party that you've hosted?

Bonnie: The best party that I hosted is now in its 11th year, and, believe it or not, it is the Saturday before Thanksgiving, a friends-only Thanksgiving party. That sounds very boring. It's just this big potluck. I think we started out with 20. There was one year where we had 120 people at this party.

It kind of ebbs and flows a little bit. Everybody shows off their Grandma's best recipe ever. I host it with another woman, and all we do is we make one turkey and one ham, and buy two bottles of wine and a six pack of beer and say, "Come on in everybody and have a good time." It's grown into this crazy thing, and I get phone calls the next day and apologies from people who are like, "I'm so sorry; I got so drunk at your Thanksgiving Party."

It's hysterical when you think about the fact that it's a whole roomful of 30, 40, 50-year-old people. For some reason they want to let their hair down before they go see their family for their real Thanksgiving dinner.

Jean: Awesome. We've been talking today with [Bonnie Buol Ruszczyk](#), the 2014 [AAM](#) Volunteer of the Year. Bonnie, congratulations again.

Bonnie: Thank you.

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Jean Caragher

Capstone Marketing

jcaragher@capstonemarketing.com

<http://www.capstonemarketing.com>

<http://capstonemarketing.com/category/blog/>



35246 US HGY 19 N
#225
Palm Harbor, FL 34684
727.210.7306



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