

A Capstone Conversation With



Jamie Thomas
Director of Marketing & Communications
LBA Group



CAPSTONE MARKETING

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Hello, this is [Jean Caragher](#), president of [Capstone Marketing](#). I am thrilled to be talking today with [Jamie Thomas](#), the Director of Marketing & Communications for the [LBA Group](#). Jamie was honored as the 2013 Marketer of the Year, which is an award given at the annual [AAM](#) conference and is sponsored by the [CPA Practice Management Forum](#), a Wolters Kluwer Publication.

Jamie has 17 years of experience in marketing professional service firms, including law and accounting. Since 2000 she has led the LBA Group's vision for growth by directing the client service and marketing efforts for the firm. Jamie is a keen strategist who successfully aligns her firm's marketing strategies with its business goals. She continually elevates her firm to the next level with an integrated mix of outreaches such as print, web, direct mail, events, and sponsorships. Jamie is a past president of AAM. She was the Chair of the 2012 Annual Summit for AAM and has been named one of the 100 Most Influential People in Accounting.

Now Jamie, when you received this award it was kind of loud and I want to read part of Sandra Lim's presentation to you. When she referred to LBA's core values, which stand for HEART and I understand LBA even refers to itself as the "Firm with a Heart". These values are: **H**elp others succeed, **E**mpower people in knowledge, **A**lways do the right thing, **R**elationship driven, **T**eamwork and trust. Here is what Sandra said, "But I would say that Jamie is the heart. In fact, Jamie is the heart and soul of the initiatives that drive her firm above and beyond others in the industry." Congratulations, Jamie, on being named Marketer of the Year. How do you take this all in, how do you feel?

Jamie Thomas: First of all, you know that you are nominated for this award. I am pretty sure that I had just not allowed myself to even believe it was possible that I could actually win. I have to share a little secret with you. When they threw up the slide at the conference that they were going to present the Marketer of the Year Award I almost went to the bathroom so that I was not even in the room because I thought, "I just don't want to be here for that disappointment." I think I had convinced myself that it was impossible. So it was amazing that night, and it was loud. I have to be honest, I think when you are in that moment, I am not sure that I really remember much of what Sandra said, nor do I really remember much of what I said when I was up on stage receiving the award. It's a true honor, first of all, to be honored for something that you just love to do and I absolutely love my job; I love the firm that I do it for. I work with a fantastic team of people and it's been a whirlwind since we got back. My partners have



been gushing and I'm getting to a point where I am telling them, "Okay, that's enough now. Let's just get back to work."

Jean Caragher: I understand they even gave you a party last night?

Jamie Thomas: They did. It was a nice little cocktail party with just the partners and our firm's administrator and my marketing coordinator; it was just the group of us. It was very nice and very appreciated.

Jean Caragher: I think it is very well deserved and clearly the relationship you have with your partners and with your firm and the passion you have for what you do has probably played a big part in your earning this recognition.

Jamie Thomas: I think the relationship that any marketing or business development director and/or the relationship with the partner group is probably 90% of the battle. It is just so vital to have that trust and communication. Being on the same page and having that relationship, it is just so important.

Jean Caragher: Then, let's go off script a little bit. Tell me how you've built that relationship because, obviously, this is something that happens over time. Are there any specific things that you've done that have helped you with that?

Jamie Thomas: I think so. They might have a different story than mine, but this is advice that I give to younger marketers. I started with the firm 13 years ago in 2000. They had never had a Marketing Director in the history of the firm, so I didn't come in with guns a blazing saying, "Okay, this is what we are going to do and you have to do this and we are going to do this." I came in and listened. I listened to how the firm had been built up to that point. I listened to what they specialized in at the time. I sat down and met with each partner, and in 2000 there were only five. I think that's the key. I think that I earned their trust because I didn't come in and force things down their throats. I came in and really listened to what they had been doing and absolutely did not assume, in any way, shape or form that I knew better than they did because this is their firm. That way of doing business together that we do, continues now. I have certainly grown in my career, so there are times now that I will say to them, "This is what we need to do," but I couldn't have done that coming in. I think it is really important to listen to the partners and really understand what it is that they do and what they enjoy doing and the types of clients they enjoy serving, because that helps to build the marketing strategy.

Jean Caragher: I think you do a lot in the community, and we just talked earlier about the firm's core values and referring to LBA as the firm with a heart. Does the community outreach and activities play a big part of your marketing efforts?

Jamie Thomas: Yes, it does. That, too, was started very early in my career at LBA. That was one of the first initiatives that we put into play. I took a look at where each of the



partners focused their practice, both from a technical standpoint and from an industry perspective. We have a very big healthcare niche here, so it was obvious that one of the partners was very healthcare focused. I took a look at what they all specialized in and then we took a look at the community organizations within Jacksonville and beyond, northeast Florida, and I helped them to determine where they needed to commit their time. It had to go hand-in-hand with what they were passionate about. I told this to all my accountants in the firm, from the time they are a staff member and all the way through partner, "I don't want you to get involved with something because you think you have to. I want you to get involved with something because you are passionate about it and you are going to love doing what you do for that organization, otherwise, you won't do it." We started very early getting them involved in community organizations and boards of directors, and there is certainly a business aspect to that. You look at who else is on those boards of directors and you say, "Okay, these are people that we want to network with for a potential referral or because we want that piece of business." There's certainly a business aspect behind it, but you also have to couple that with the passion that the partner has for the organization to make sure that they are going to commit the time and their resources.

Jean Caragher: You just talked about a couple of great ways, listening to the partners and helping them to find where they should be involved in something that they are interested in, and I totally agree with you; that is a key point. On the other side of the scale, what do you find is the greatest challenge in marketing CPA firms?

Jamie Thomas: I might get some hate mail now on this one. It's partner participation, commitment and engagement. Let's face it, for the most part, it's not because they don't want to be involved in executing the strategy that the marketing department has put into place. They are so focused on client service, which they absolutely should be, but it is often that then the marketing strategies and the business development pursuits tend to fall by the wayside. Again, it's not because they are deliberately trying to get out of having to do something, but it's just the nature of the beast. That's the biggest challenge because the market out there that we want to touch and that we want to engage in to increase our circles of influence and increase our referral sources and increase our share of the marketplace by getting new clients, it is not me that they are buying, it is those partners. We can do a lot of marketing and communications and brand awareness around those types of activities, but at the end of the day, it's truly the partners that need to be the ones who are engaging in the relationships that need to be made in order for us to grow the business. Without having them engaged, that's our biggest challenge. Fortunately, I am pretty lucky. I don't run up against that too often. Maybe in some busier times we might get a little bit of pushback but, for the most part, I think I'm pretty lucky with the group that I have. They are absolutely committed and they do commit the time and resources even when they look at me and say, "Do I really need to go?" and I tell them, "Yes, you do need to go." They will go.



Jean Caragher: I think you are in a fortunate position. I did a similar interview with Tom Hood from the Maryland Association of CPA's and he talked about partner meetings and retreats and making commitments to what they are going to do. He said, "I have this rule that when they leave the room the partners either have to agree to like it, love it, or live with it." I thought that was a great thing because his point was, "We are going to have this discussion, we are going to make these commitments, and you have to like it, or love it, or live with it. I don't want to hear anything else. I don't want to hear any dissention once you leave the room." I remembered that because I just thought that was a classic.

Jamie Thomas: I truly do. I don't think that most of them, really, just don't want to do it. I think there is also some fear around a lot of it, as well. They are CPA's and they are traditionally very introverted people. Now there are exceptions to that rule but, traditionally, CPAs are introverted and marketing is not comfortable for them. I think it is really important as marketers that we help them get comfortable with it by really working closely with them to figure out what their strengths are around marketing; maybe they are fantastic writers, maybe they really like to go to networking events, or maybe they like to give presentations. Find those strengths and then hone in on those strengths and not force them to do it. If you have somebody that does not like going to a networking event, why are you going to force them to do that?

Jean Caragher: That's right. I totally agree because they will be the ones standing in the corner with their arms crossed and looking very unhappy, and that is not what you want.

Jamie Thomas: No, it's not.

Jean Caragher: Jamie, you have been in this industry for a while. What are the biggest changes that you've noticed in accounting marketing over the past five years?

Jamie Thomas: We're definitely seeing a bigger increase in business development activities, for sure. Certainly more firms are hiring business development directors. We have seen quite an increase in that role over the last five years and if firms are not hiring specific business development directors, they are asking their marketing directors to become more business development oriented. Another thing that I have seen is how much social media and digital media has grown as far as the role that it plays in our marketing strategy, and we certainly can't ignore that. The third thing is, and maybe this is just because I am older, but I think marketing directors are really having to be a lot more strategic and digging into numbers than we ever have before.

Jean Caragher: That's because their partners are asking them for the results of the initiatives that they are implementing.



Jamie Thomas: Yes, 13 years ago a lot of the marketing initiatives were around branding, brochures, and newsletters, and all in print, mind you. Now, fast forward to 2013, everything is more focused around strategy and niche marketing and developing a true pursuit process with your pipeline and websites. Thirteen years ago our website was still just a glorified brochure that was on the Internet. Now, it is truly a business development tool. I remember, maybe six or seven years ago, we were still saying, “We don’t really get business through the Internet, but you have to be there because if people look for you, you have to at least have some kind of presence.” Well, times certainly have changed because we absolutely get business directly through our website.

Jean Caragher: There’s that new generation of business owners coming up, wouldn’t you agree?

Jamie Thomas: Absolutely.

Jean Caragher: Just like our staff people and the younger marketers, they are totally comfortable with this technology and social media and how all this works and what it could mean to business. I think there are some different views, perhaps from older generation partners versus younger generation partners, of whether the web is going to be a lead generation source that you could actually get business online. We are seeing that, yes, if you use a great combination of tools and you are consistent with your site and social media, it definitely is a lead generator.

Jamie Thomas: Absolutely. We launched our new site in September 2012 and it has paid for itself, twice over, with business that we have received directly through the website.

Jean Caragher: That is wonderful! That is just another way of being more strategic and showing the numbers. Given all these changes over the past five years, what’s your prediction for accounting marketing for the next five years?

Jamie Thomas: I have been asked this question a lot and I think about it a lot. I wish I had a crystal ball that I could see into the next five years. I think we are going to have to keep a really close eye on the economy. I think we are still teetering; we could go either way. I think we have just as much chance of sliding backwards again with this economy, than we do slowly inching our way out of it. So we have to be very careful with how we look at the next five years, from a marketing perspective.

I think you are going to see a lot more merger activity. We’ve seen a lot of it and it’s not just really big firms eating up little firms anymore. You see a lot of like-sized firms joining forces, and that’s a whole new ball game. If you are on the side that is coming into the bigger firm or if your firm is losing its identity because you are joining this firm and you are going to take on that name, that is a whole new re-branding project that



you are going to have to do with your marketplace and your clients. If you are part of the firm that is bringing in a smaller firm or the firm that is not going to carry on their name but take yours, you probably now have a whole new set of specialties that you are going to have to go out and market that that competitor was very good at. Now you have to convince people that they now have your name, so your firm is just as good. I think we are going to see a lot of mergers and acquisitions, and I think that is going to continue.

Jean Caragher: This, as you just said, opens up many opportunities for marketers. I know those marketers at a very high level within their firms are involved in the due diligence of merger candidates.

Jamie Thomas: Absolutely. That's, again, a whole other skill set for a marketer. If we are looking for a firm to merge in, as the marketing director for your firm, you can play a key role in looking at the potential firm to merge into yours and doing a SWOT analysis with those firms. But then, also advising the partners why certain firms might make more sense over others, if they have a big niche in an area that you have always wanted to get into with your firm but you knew you couldn't build it from the ground up because that other firm already has the corner of the market. Looking at the professionals within that firm and how active they are in the community and how well they are known, it's a very big part of higher level strategic marketers when you are looking at the M&A business. I think we are going to still see a lot of increase on the business development front.

Jean Caragher: Do you mean firms hiring more business developers?

Jamie Thomas: Either that or having marketing directors get a lot more involved on the business development side.

Jean Caragher: Okay, how so?

Jamie Thomas: I'll take our firm for example. I was purely marketing for umpteen years and we have just placed so much more focus on the business development process, from implementing a pipeline to having very formal prospect lists within each of our industry niche groups; I have to drive that process. While I was very purely marketing and branding communications for so long, I am pushing more of that to my marketing coordinator, who does a fantastic job. I focus a lot more on keeping track of the pipeline. I facilitate all of our niche meetings, and part of each niche meeting is looking at the prospect list and going through action items with each pursuit team. It's a lot more involved on the business development side than I have ever been.

Jean Caragher: Do you go on meetings with the prospects?



Jamie Thomas: Sometimes. We try to send the partner and the manager that would be working with that potential client because that truly is the relationship that the client is going to have. Now, if it is a client that we really don't know much about and they have invited us to come out, maybe somebody that we hadn't been pursuing ourselves so we really don't know a whole lot about them, sometimes I will go because I hear things that the partner doesn't. They hear all the technical things, I hear the soft, where they are feeling pain, what they are really upset about and probably it doesn't have anything to do with the numbers on a piece of paper.

Jean Caragher: I think that's a special skill. There is always a danger in partners expecting their marketers to be business developers. You've got an interesting role with your firm. I would just caution that firms need to be careful about the expectations they have of their marketers.

Jamie Thomas: Absolutely, because not all marketers have an interest in business development, and that's okay. We actually did hire a business developer about three years ago. When we did that, my managing partner said to me directly, "Jamie, we value what you do on the marketing side and that's what we want you to focus on. We want you to focus on the marketing piece because we know that's your strength and we value the fact that you do that." That meant a lot to me because, at the time, I really didn't want to do any business development activities, it just wasn't something that I wanted to do. I wanted to continue to focus on our marketing activities. The gentleman that we hired to be our business developer was here for about three years. When he was leaving, which was just in April of this year, I realized that I had become more comfortable with the possibility of being more involved with that. So it really was me going to the partners to say, "Look, I got this. I can handle this, at least for now. If we make a decision to hire another director of business development somewhere down the road, then we can get to that. But in the meantime, I don't want this process to slip and I don't want things to fall through the cracks." I felt more comfortable doing it.

Jean Caragher: It sounds like you taking on that role evolved over time?

Jamie Thomas: Absolutely.

Jean Caragher: Jamie, when you think about your skills, which of your personal skills do you think contributes most to your success?

Jamie Thomas: I think you take all of those profile tests, like the DISC and the Myers Briggs, and mine always came back as, "I want to be the one that makes sure everybody is okay." It's the nurturer in me; I think that has had a big part of it. Also, because I don't come across as, "you must do this." I come at it from more of a, "I want you to be comfortable with this. I don't want this to intimidate you. I want to make sure that we are having fun with what we are doing because if you are enjoying it, you are going to do more of it, which is only better for you and it's better for the firm." I work with



the staff, the seniors, the managers, the senior managers, and the first thing I say to them every time I sit down to talk to them is, "You know that I am never going to make you do anything that you don't want to do." I think that's been the biggest part of it, and they trust me because I have never gone back on my word. I tell them, "Until you are a partner, I will not force you to do things you don't want to do." Now, when you are a partner; that is a different story.

Jean Caragher: Then they are fair game.

Jamie Thomas: Right, and I will force you to do things you don't want to do... but I think that is the biggest thing. I think it's that nurturing and that I make them feel comfortable and excited about the process. I actually just had a meeting with the staff accountants and the senior accountants last week, and we are starting to introduce them to having their own personal marketing plans and developing a pipeline, and that is very scary to them. The first thing I said to them was, "Look, just because this has a column for potential fees that might be brought into the firm and the chance percentage that you really think you are going to pull it in," I said, "Don't worry about that. You don't have to worry about that until you are a manager. Let's just focus on getting used to this process and all we are going to do is take a look at where your key client relationships are. What I want you to focus on is really just providing the most amazing client service you can to your clients. That's what I want you to focus on, from a client perspective." Then, we went through their COI's and their referral sources and talked about how to think about nurturing those and the types of clients that makes sense for the firm. I just wanted them to start recognizing what might be a good client. I got an email from one of them afterwards and she said, "Okay, I do have to admit that this whole process scared me, but I want to thank you because you made it not so scary and I am going to really sit down and think about where I want to get involved in the community," because that's another thing that we talked about. That meant a lot to me because she's very introverted, very, very introverted, and I knew that it would scare her. So for her to take the time and send me an email and say, "Thanks for not making it scary...."

Jean Caragher: That's a wonderful testament and I need to mention, as well, what a long term view the LBA Group is taking by getting your staff and seniors involved and educating them about this process at such early points in their careers.

Jamie Thomas: That's why the marketing culture here is so amazing. Obviously, tax and accounting is a huge part of a CPA firm, but here, marketing is probably right up there with tax and accounting. That is just how, I would like to say, "That's how we roll here."

Jean Caragher: That's awesome. Jamie, tell me, I know you've referred to different things during our conversation, so far, but what are some of the factors or skills that can enable accounting marketers to be successful? What needs to be in place?



Jamie Thomas: I think you have to be confident. That's not the same as arrogant. I do think you have to have some confidence because it can be very intimidating to sit across the table from partners in a CPA firm; they are very smart people. But you have to be confident in the fact that what you are helping them do is helping them grow their firm; I think that's important. I also think that you have to be prepared. You cannot walk into a meeting without being completely prepared, and there does have to be some semblance of a strategist within you. Partners, we talked about this earlier, are getting to a point where they don't really want to hear the "ra ra", they want to hear the strategy and how it is going to help the firm grow. I also think it is just uberly important that marketers understand the accounting profession and the industry.

Jean Caragher: That's a big one you've just mentioned. We really need to know how a firm works, how they make money. Not to expect them to go out and manage an audit, but they need to know how the firm works, how they make a profit, what the different measures are to be able to get inside the heads of the accountants.

Jamie Thomas: Yes. You have to understand how each different department within the firm, how they are measured. How do we know that was a successful engagement? I think marketers need to absolutely understand every service that the firm provides, who we provide them to, and why we provide them. We have a healthcare consulting group and they do chart audits. Well, what is that? Why would a physician practice need a chart audit? We need to understand that ourselves, and for how much. Marketers have to understand the fee structure.

Jean Caragher: You are exactly right because if you are going to be part of the messaging and, perhaps, working on proposals or the dialog with people in these different areas, you need to be able to talk the talk.

Jamie Thomas: That all comes from sitting back and listening and learning. It's a constant learning process and there is not a partner in a CPA firm across the country that would say, "No," if a marketing director went to them and said, "I would really like to sit down and have you tell me exactly what you do and how you do it and for whom and why." This is what they do. CPA's love what they do.

Jean Caragher: You've mentioned a couple of things already, because I wanted to ask you about the best piece of advice you can give to accounting marketers, and you've mentioned a couple of times already about the importance of listening.

Jamie Thomas: And, that's it.

Jean Caragher: They really need to be paying attention and understanding what their firm does, what the partners do, learn what they are comfortable with, all the things that you've already said today?



Jamie Thomas: And, just never stop learning. I learn something new every day.

Jean Caragher: Yes, if you are looking for it. I do believe that you do learn something, but you have to be open to it.

Jamie Thomas: Yes, you do.

Jean Caragher: So tell me then, what is your best piece of advice for managing partners?

Jamie Thomas: Be the champion for your marketing directors. Really support the role and the initiatives, which means, obviously, the managing partner and the marketing director really have to have a great line of communication. To be able to go to the rest of the partner group when the marketing director takes the strategy or suggested initiative, or comes to the rest of the partner group with the marketing plan and budget for the next year. I would certainly hope that that has already gone through the managing partner and that they are on the same page, but that managing partner has to be right there as the biggest champion and supporter for the marketing director because we all know that everything has to come from the top; this is no different. To be that champion. Now, that does not mean that managing partners should just agree with everything that the marketing director comes to them with. No, I wish that were the case.

Jean Caragher: That would be too easy.

Jamie Thomas: It would be too easy and if you are in a firm that does not have a marketing director or if you are in a firm that is looking to hire a marketing director, then you really have to be sure that the entire partner group is on board with what the expectations of that marketing director are because I have seen so many times where there really is not a very clear set of expectations or goals and sometimes it is because the partners just don't know what this person should be doing for them.

Jean Caragher: Because all of them have a different idea.

Jamie Thomas: I think that making sure that the expectations and goals are very clear to everybody, and that the managing partner supports what the marketing director is trying to accomplish based on those expectations and goals.

Jean Caragher: Fabulous. Let me ask you one last question, more of a fun question.

Jamie Thomas: Okay.

Jean Caragher: So tell me, Gator football and Red Sox baseball?



Jamie Thomas: I am an Air Force brat, Jean, so I have moved all over the country. As a kid, I moved every three years and my father was a colonel in the Air Force. When he retired, he retired out of Langley Air Force Base in Virginia; he got a civilian job that moved the family down here to Jacksonville, Florida. Most people, all their teams are in one little state, and I just went with my heart. When you live in Jacksonville, you are either a Gator or a Seminole, for the most part, and I just went the orange and blue route. As a matter of fact, my sister just dropped my niece off on Wednesday. She starts classes at the University of Florida on Monday. She is our newest Gator; we are very proud of her. Then, Red Sox baseball. I was living in Rhode Island and that's actually where I got my start in accounting marketing. I worked for a fabulous firm in Providence, Rhode Island and I just fell in love with the Red Sox. There was something about going to Fenway. I am just a huge Red Sox fan and I love watching them play. Then, I married a Yankee fan. How that happened, I am not quite sure.

Jean Caragher: My niece did the same thing. My niece is a Yankee's fan and her husband is a Red Sox fan.

Jamie Thomas: Makes it interesting, I guess.

Jean Caragher: The real issue is when they play each other. I think, then, they have to go to their own sides of the room as they watch the game. Well, we have been talking today with Jamie Thomas, the Director of Marketing and Communications of the LBA Group. Jamie is the 2013 Marketer of the Year. Again, Jamie, congratulations! It was very well deserved

Jamie Thomas: Thank you, Jean, thank you so much. I appreciate that.



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