

A Capstone Conversation With The 2012 AAM Volunteer of the Year



Laura Bardey Sparks
Freelance Writer and Owner
Creative Sparks



CAPSTONE MARKETING

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Welcome! This is [Jean Caragher](#), President of [Capstone Marketing](#). Today I am pleased to be speaking with [Laura Bardey Sparks](#) who was named the 2012 Volunteer of the Year by the [Association for Accounting Marketing](#).

As freelance writer and owner of [Creative Sparks](#), Laura writes thought leadership content for accounting professionals, translating their ideas into compelling content. Before launching Creative Sparks in 2010, Laura served as manager of marketing services for PKF North America, one of the largest associations of independent accounting firms, and before that she wrote and edited monthly accounting practice management newsletters, including *CPA Marketing Report* and *CPA Managing Partner Report*. Laura has been a member of the Association for Accounting Marketing since 1998, and let me just share with you part of the Volunteer of the Year presentation given by Marc Busny: “Laura has worked tirelessly over the past couple of years to revamp AAM’s *MarkeTrends* newsletter, turning it into a professional publication called *Growth Strategies*. The number of hours she has devoted to AAM at a time when she was getting her freelance business off the ground was astronomical for a volunteer. The *Growth Strategies* publication would not be where it is today without her at the helm.” Laura, welcome and congratulations on being named Volunteer of the Year. How does it feel?

Laura Bardey Sparks: Thank you, Jean. It feels so wonderful. It was nice to hear those words again because I think I was a little overwhelmed when Marc was giving that introduction.

Jean Caragher: How early on did you figure out it was you?

Laura Bardey Sparks: Pretty early. I don’t think anyone else quite meets that description. [Growth Strategies](#) has been a labor of love, and just seeing it get out there and the reception it’s had, has been very gratifying in receiving this recognition.

Jean Caragher: It’s very well deserved.

Laura Bardey Sparks: Thank you.

Jean Caragher: Laura, you’ve been in this profession now quite a while and I do have to go down memory lane. I remember having dinner with you and Suzanne Verity, however many years ago, when Suzanne was introducing you to me. I remember it



clearly, and here we are, however many years later, and look at all that you've accomplished. It's awesome! So over all this time, tell me, what have seen to be the greatest challenge in marketing CPA firms?

Laura Bardey Sparks: The greatest challenge in marketing any firm is all the "noise" out there. People are bombarded with information, day in and day out, and it's amazing to me that anyone is able to break through. So, when you are trying to talk to a business owner, who is maybe a global executive, it's not for the faint of heart. You have got to be very targeted with your message.

Jean Caragher: Tell us a little bit more about what you mean about "noise?"

Laura Bardey Sparks: By "noise," I mean from the time we wake up in the morning, technology has made information follow us everywhere. We are bombarded with ads on our Facebook page, we watch CNN, and you have the constant ticker below; there is constant stimuli going on. People don't have the space to really focus and hear a message.

Jean Caragher: So, it's the challenge for the CPA firm to target their message to the right audience in a way that is going to be receptive.

Laura Bardey Sparks: Yes, in a way that is going to really peak their attention. That is going to get right into the heart of what they care about.

Jean Caragher: And what do you think is the best way to do that?

Laura Bardey Sparks: It's all about understanding what your market is first. Once you understand what they care about, then you've got to tell a story and it's got to be unique. Accounting firms have an opportunity to really tap into their partners, managers, and the younger staff people's point of view. Every one of them is interacting with their clients and has specific points of view about what their clients are struggling with and how they can address those challenges; it's not just information. You can't just give the client information because that's not going to resonate with them. It's about that perspective and telling that story.

Jean Caragher: This kind of dovetails into other Capstone Conversations I have been having and when I asked this question, a couple of them talked about differentiation and the challenge of firms differentiating themselves. I think what you're saying here about using the perspectives and the knowledge of the partners and professional staff can be a way to help a firm differentiate itself.

Laura Bardey Sparks: Absolutely.



Jean Caragher: Interesting. That is a big challenge. I wouldn't even want to count how many emails we get a day. It's overwhelming sometimes the amount of information that we get.

Laura Bardey Sparks: If you go out and Google any topic that you're talking about to your client, a lot of firms are saying the same types of things; it's the same types of messages. If you're saying the same thing that your competitor is, you are not getting through. Neither one of you is getting through. Another way to look at that is, online you're not getting any points with the search engines. Your content has to be so unique that it really pushes you to the top of those search engines.

Jean Caragher: Right, and that could be a whole other conversation we could have, isn't it, about SEO and Search Engine Optimization? What's the biggest change that you've noticed in accounting marketing over the past 10 years?

Laura Bardey Sparks: I had a flash of inspiration last night. I remembered an article that I wrote for *CPA Marketing Report*. It was December 1999 and we looked back over the 90's and talked to some of the leading accounting marketers about their vision for the future; where they saw it going. I thought [Melinda Guillemette](#) had a very insightful comment. She said, "At some point technology will enable us to customize our marketing so that we send specific information to specific people or groups of people. I think that it will be within our power to bring it down to the nth degree of individualization..." And this was in 1999, which was really the very beginning of the Internet being embraced and the power of it. So, when you look back over the past 10 years and how much more targeted we were able to get with databases and social media and SEO, we're able to get very specific about exactly who we're talking to and what they want to talk about. That is making marketing a true conversation, not just between you and your prospect, but also between hundreds of individuals.

Jean Caragher: Because you don't know how many other people are going to see information that you've posted online or with the capability of sharing articles and information, the message could just continue on and on.

Laura Bardey Sparks: Absolutely.

Jean Caragher: It's pretty powerful and kudos to Melinda, that was great! So, what's your prediction for accounting marketing for the next five years? We have this big change and we could be a lot more targeted in using the technology, what do you see in the future?

Laura Bardey Sparks: What I observed is that accounting firms are getting better and better at telling the world what they think, and that to me is really what that term has come into use with content marketing; it's become very popular. What that means to me is it's about communicating your thoughts, ideas, and perspective. So, I really see



accountants starting to embrace, or they have been embracing it, and will increasingly. That's again, I alluded to you before, clients need that perspective; there's so much information out there. You can really find information on anything you want to know, but information isn't knowledge and so that information won't necessarily click with the client or the prospect. It won't sink in and tell them what they need to do if it's not put into perspective for them.

Jean Caragher: I think you said something key and I even wrote it down here myself, that information isn't knowledge. That's one of those phrases that sounds pretty simple, but it's profound because you are exactly right; they need to take the information, and as you said before, relate their perspectives to it.

Laura Bardey Sparks: I was interviewing one of our clients recently and he said, "Why do clients turn to their CPAs for business advice?" In some cases, the CPAs aren't necessarily any more astute business people than the client. Hopefully they are, but the reason that they are turning to them is because they have that relationship and because the CPA is going to have a different perspective on it. Anyone can go online and Google "management" and/or everything they need to know about cash flow, they want that perspective from their CPA and they trust that CPA.

Jean Caragher: That's very true. So, Laura what factors or skills do you think enable accounting marketers to be successful? I know you know a lot of them, what skills do they have?

Laura Bardey Sparks: What I was just talking about, it's really the need for accountants to tell their story and bring that unique perspective that engages the listener and establishes that connection. The marketer needs to be able to harness that. So, you are harnessing not only the knowledge of that partner or manager, but also their personality, their unique point of view, and you've got to bring that to light. The beautiful thing is, it's already there. Every partner that I've talked to has a perspective worth sharing and I'm going to give credit to my friend and coach, [Martha Carnahan](#), who said, "You've just got to find a way to download their heads." To be able to "download their heads," that's kind of a unique skill. But one of the things you need to be able to do is to use their time effectively because their time is a precious commodity and they're always going to give precedence to their current clients and their client responsibilities. But accountants are very conscientious and they want to do what is best for their clients. So, if you can demonstrate to them how sharing their knowledge is going to help, not only them, but their clients and their future clients, and you can do it within a minimum amount of time, then I think you are going to be very successful.

Jean Caragher: That's an interesting perspective. So, which of your personal skills do you think has contributed most to your success?



Laura Bardey Sparks: I think it's exactly that. I have been writing for and about accountants for 15 years, and I have gotten really good at "downloading" that information in the partner's head onto the written page or the screen. My training as a journalist helps because it has taught me how to ask the right questions, and asking the right question is critical to really anything in life; you can't get the right answer if you are not asking the right questions to begin with. There are three questions, I've realized, that are essential when it comes to marketing.

Jean Caragher: Oh good, and I hope you are going to share that with us.

Laura Bardey Sparks: I am. I'm so excited about them. So your first question is, "Who specifically am I going to reach?" Most people realize that you've got to speak to your audience, but it really helps to have a specific person or specific type of person in mind. So, when I'm interviewing an accountant about their tax services, I always ask them to tell me about a specific client engagement because that's going to make it so much more personal. Even if you're not writing a case study per se, you are going to tell a better story if you have that specific protagonist in mind.

Then the second question is, "Why should that person or type of persons, i.e. the CFO in a public company for instance, why should they care about this topic right now, what makes this compelling to them today?"

And the third I'm going to steal from [Bruce Marcus](#), as I recently had the opportunity to interview him for *Growth Strategies*, so watch for that interview. He said, "The most important thing that you need to think about when you're writing anything is - What do I want that person to know, think, or feel after they read or hear this message?" I think that, again, it's so simple but so profound because the best writing and the best messages make one single point, and they make it well.

Jean Caragher: Wonderful. That was awesome because we can always learn new things, Laura, as you realize. Those are great questions that we could ask ourselves every time we start to do any projects, whether it's an interview or not.

Laura Bardey Sparks: Yes, just pick up the phone and talk to a colleague. What's the one thing that they really want to communicate?

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

Laura Bardey Sparks: You have to be courageous. It's definitely something that I've come to understand over my 15 years in the industry but the best marketing takes a stand, otherwise you sound like everyone else. I mentioned before, if what you're saying is pretty much the same as what your competitors are saying, you are not winning any points with the people you're trying to reach.



Jean Caragher: So it's spending that extra time to really make sure that you are putting your own spin, if you will, or enhancing that information with your own knowledge and perspective?

Laura Bardey Sparks: Yes. I would also say, more than the marketer's information and knowledge that it is also an important perspective, making sure that you are bringing the firm's point of view to light. My advice to any accounting firm leader would be the same, don't be afraid to put your perspective out there and ask, "What is our point of view?" I think that any firm, it will be so powerful if they, practice-by-practice and department-by-department, say, "What is our point of view? What is something that we can take a stand on?" Then, all of your content is driven by that point of view.

Jean Caragher: Interesting. Any last words of advice?

Laura Bardey Sparks: Taking a stand and putting a point of view out there is risky and it's scary because you might be wrong. CPAs don't like to be wrong for a very good reason. There are some serious consequences when you are talking about auditing or taxes. But, in marketing, you have to take risks because otherwise you just end up sounding like everybody else. I have to say that, this again is something that I have had to come to understand because I certainly don't like to be wrong either; however, for a writer, perfectionism is one of your worst enemies because you can always improve your writing, but at some point you have to get it out there and that applies to marketing, too.

I'm not saying that you need to just throw stuff out there but when it comes to competing for clients, what's even worse than having a wrong answer is having the right answer and not letting anyone know about it. So, that's the best piece of advice that I can give accounting firm leaders, is don't let the fear of being wrong paralyze you and keep you from telling a compelling story.

Jean Caragher: That was very well said, Laura. That's a great point. We have been talking this morning to Laura Bardey Sparks, freelance writer and owner of Creative Sparks and the 2012 Association for Accounting Marketing Volunteer of the Year. Laura, congratulations again and thanks for your time today.

Laura Bardey Sparks: Thanks Jean. Take care.



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