

# A Capstone Conversation With Rhonda Maraziti



Chief Marketing Officer  
WithumSmith+Brown



CAPSTONE MARKETING

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Hello, this is [Jean Caragher](#), President of [Capstone Marketing](#). I am excited today to be talking with Rhonda Maraziti, the [2016 Marketer of the Year](#), an award sponsored by [INSIDE Public Accounting](#) and given out at the 2016 AAM Summit. Rhonda is the chief marketing officer at [WithumSmith+Brown](#), a firm of 750 staff members in six states. She develops and implements strategic plans and campaigns that achieve significant, measurable results and bottom line impact, leading a team of 15 marketing professionals who execute on these initiatives. In 2013, Rhonda was named one of [New Jersey's Best 50 Women in Business](#). Rhonda, congratulations on being named Marketer of the Year. How does it feel?

**Rhonda:** Thank you so much. It was unexpected and I was so flattered. I was thrilled for the leadership of my firm to nominate me for this award. It's very exciting.

**Jean:** And very well-deserved. Rhonda, I know you've been with Withum for over 10 years now. Is that correct?

**Rhonda:** Yes, 10 years. I started as marketing coordinator at the bottom of the chain and moved my way up.

**Jean:** This is a true success story! What do you find is the greatest challenge in marketing CPA firms?

**Rhonda:** First and foremost, it's competition. Especially here where we're based largely in the northeast. We have a presence in Boston, New York City, New Jersey and Philadelphia. And, we have an office in Orlando, Florida. The competition here is tremendous. We all offer the same great client service and innovative solutions, so you're trying to find what your differentiator is in the marketplace.

I think everybody struggles with that. It's such an interesting time right now in the world of social media and digital marketing, but at the same time we still have to do traditional marketing. We have to address all kinds of demographics. It's the Millennial and the Gen Xer's coming up behind them, but you still have the Baby Boomers. Some of them are retiring, so you have to address the marketing needs of what your audience wants, soup to nuts, you have to do it all.

**Jean:** You are in a very competitive market in the northeast, among a lot of very sizeable firms, including the Big Four.



**Rhonda:** Yes, for sure. These are good firms. I'm actually friendly with a lot of the CMO's and marketing directors of these firms, so I know we all have the same challenges.

**Jean:** I remember back in the day when I was an internal marketer and we would network together. I know sometimes the managing partners probably thought, "Why are you doing that?" But you weren't giving away the company secrets and you got to speak with other smart people who understood what you did.

**Rhonda:** Absolutely. The collaboration among the marketing professionals in our profession is so good. Everybody seems to want to share. I love that part of it. Having that association provides a lot of good opportunities for us.

**Jean:** That's one of the best things about AAM, it is the sharing and the collegiality, the community of marketers.

What are the biggest changes that you've noticed? You've mentioned a little bit about digital, but let's say over the past five years, what are the changes that you've seen in accounting marketing?

**Rhonda:** I'm even going to go back 10 years ago when I first started. Back then, the marketing department was in charge of planning parties and events and creating pretty brochures. That was our job. Those days are gone. Now, in accounting marketing, you have to be strategic. You have to have a business development mindset and you need to be focused in your efforts and develop metrics on everything you do to have return on investment and leverage analytics for metrics. There is so much more to it now, it's so different than it was 10 years ago.

**Jean:** I'm sure that what you're able to do at Withum is because of the firm's leadership enabling you to do your job and giving you the resources that you need to do your job.

**Rhonda:** That is absolutely correct; you need that tone from the top. At Withum, we have a strong marketing culture and that's our management committee and our CEO. They understand and get that. We have to have a strong marketing culture in order to be competitive in the marketplace. It's not just about the marketing team, it's our accounting professionals that also need to have a marketing mindset to get out there and develop new business. Our department is here to help develop those tools and those opportunities to help them bring in new business or better enhance their client relationships. We are instrumental in doing that. That's a big change since I began at the firm.

**Jean:** What do you think is the best program or initiative that Withum provides the staff in enhancing their marketing skills? You were just saying how important that is for the next generation. What's the best thing that works?



**Rhonda:** It's our niche development initiatives and I think many firms are doing this. You have to demonstrate industry expertise or practice area expertise. You are a technical expert, or an expert in consulting, construction, real estate or healthcare, whatever the industry is. We developed our initiative. We actually worked with Gale Crosley five years ago. She helped us build that structure and since then, it's such a great initiative in that it helps give our younger staff some direction in their careers.

"Hey, are you interested in construction? You're interested in healthcare? Come join the meetings, the niche meetings and we'll give you some direction and some contacts," and it gives them some guidance on how to build their career, make more connections in the industry, and build their client base. I think that has been the most successful initiative for our staff at the firm.

**Jean:** I'm sure strategically for the firm as a whole for you to go to market with your niche expertise is an advantage?

**Rhonda:** Absolutely. We can show our proposal win rate increasing every year since we did this, 10% a year where I think we have a 70% win rate now. That's pretty phenomenal, since before doing that we were probably around 40% to 50%.

**Jean:** You have given us a peek at what's changed over the past 10 years. Looking into the future, what prediction would you make for accounting marketing?

**Rhonda:** I think competition is still going to be a challenge. There are more regional firms that are becoming super-regional firms, and super-regional firms are going to be even bigger national firms. There will always be that; we just have to keep up on all of the changes. Speaking of changes, you have to keep up on all of the laws and regulations, and we're in an election year.

But the biggest things I predict are going to be huge in accounting marketing are digital, video and social media becoming more and more sophisticated. As marketers, we need to leverage these tools to help drive new business. Let's face it, the Millennials are the up and coming generation that are going to take over the workplace.

I think the number is in 2025, 75% of the workplace will be the millennial generation and they are all about mobile phones, apps, websites, digital and social media and social interaction. All firms really need to embrace it now. We've embraced that for the last eight years. We started Twitter when it first came out in 2009, and we're all exploring how to use Snapchat for business and we are on Instagram. So how do you keep leveraging these tools and stay on top of it all? I think we're going to see a lot more sophistication in leveraging digital, video and social media.

**Jean:** If there are firms or marketers out there that are questioning whether they should



be into social, you've just gave them the answer about why that's important.

**Rhonda:** You absolutely have to. It's so relevant and certainly with the generation that's going to be taking over the workplace, you have to be involved with it. You have to be smart about it, that's the key. You cannot just throw up links and think, "Hey, I have a social media presence". It is having a voice on social media so you can get that engagement. That's important.

Another prediction for accounting marketing is that I think we're going to hear more about firm culture, and that the marketing department is there to really help develop the culture. There is going to be such a crunch for talent with the boomers aging out and fewer accounting major graduates coming out of the colleges. There's going to be competition to get that talent, so why do they come to the firm? Well, they want to choose a firm that has a great culture.

At our firm, the marketing team members are definitely ambassadors of our culture and we do help with creating a fun initiative, like posting things on social media that get them all engaged. Everybody knows about our annual video and our younger staff loves to be a part of it.

There is corporate social responsibility, doing community outreach efforts. We do five dollar jeans days. The marketing team helps facilitate all of that. More firms are going to be coming on board with that. I'm already getting phone calls from other smaller firms saying, "Hey, what do you guys do? How did you implement that?" So, marketing will be a part of that recruitment process, keeping the culture alive and keeping the firm attractive to the younger talent.

**Jean:** I know over the years you've built your network of other marketers and accounting marketers. What factors or skills enable marketing people and accounting firms to be successful?

**Rhonda:** First, they have to have a natural inclination or love of business and business growth, and want to be a part of something and feel like they are of value to their firm in helping it grow. When you have that kind of sense, people see that, people know you're passionate about what you do. I think having that passion for what we do, that's really important and can be seen by everybody. The leadership sees it and it gets people excited about marketing. You have to have that passion and that drive and that sense of business growth. You want your business to grow, and you want to be part of that. That's definitely a factor that allows marketers to be successful in their firm and just in the profession in general.

Certainly, strong leadership skills and having the ability to influence others through strong communications. How can you convince them "Hey, I think we should make an investment here in this sponsorship because of this audience," and you have all the



facts. We're marketers, they are accountants. We need to think the way they think. They want all the details, they want dollars and cents associated to it. They want the metrics, and the KPIs just to make sure we're on point and this is why we made this decision. Having that ability also to influence but be smart about it and making the right decisions and thinking the way the accountants think, helps them all to be successful.

**Jean:** To be able to make your case and have the numbers and evidence to back it up. It's not just an idea that you think might be fun, this is you making a business pitch.

Which of your personal skills contributes most to your success?

**Rhonda:** I do have a passion for what I do. I love it and the fact that I have this great team of marketing professionals who work alongside me; I couldn't be more proud of them. They are so talented and I think I have that personality, that passion that people get excited about.

**Jean:** I can tell just by the sound of your voice.

**Rhonda:** I really do enjoy my job and people see that. I have a generally light personality and I get along with almost everyone but you know what? I also like to take the time to listen and I get it. People are people, right? They are accountants. They have clients. They're very busy already. But, I can feel the pressure that they have to help bring in new business or help with firm growth. I listen to them. What's going on? What's going on in their lives? What's going on with their clients? Take the time to listen and then formulate a plan for them; you just can't be forceful about things. You have to work with people. I think I do that pretty well. So again, just trying to get people excited about things but work with them and not against them, has helped me succeed here with them.

**Jean:** Let me ask you because you've mentioned it before. You've been with your firm over 10 years and you started as a marketing coordinator. Was there anything specific in your career growth that moved you from a marketing coordinator to a chief marketing officer? What would you say to other marketing coordinators out there?

**Rhonda:** One thing, this may not directly answer this, but this comes to mind. Earlier on in my career, one of my jobs was to help coordinate our firm's partner retreat. Every year, all the partners in the firm get together and they go to a golf resort and they stay over a few nights. I would help coordinate the golf and the dinners, etc. That gave me the opportunity to get to know all of the partners. I made it a point to go talk to everybody and got to know them on a personal level. Nothing too deep, a high personal level and then got to know what they do with the firm. I think having built those relationships really helped. That was one thing that helped me in the partners' eyes, they got to know me as a marketer in the firm.



Having those relationships helped me gain some respect with the partners. Then, we started the niche initiative, I had a bigger voice. It's not just about the events, it's the niche initiative and they totally get it. They understood that I understood the strategic direction of the firm. Then, the opportunity came to become marketing director (the marketing director at the time went on maternity leave and then decided not to come back). My team members around me said, "Just throw your hat in the ring, just do it, just apply for the job."

And, because I had established such a good relationship with our firm's leadership and the partner group, they said, "Go for it." That is a recommendation I would always give the accounting marketers. Never be shy to get to know the partners. Go over and shake their hand and take them to lunch, take your professionals to lunch and get to know them a little more because then they just know you as a person and that you're there to help them.

**Jean:** That's a great story and a great example of using an opportunity to your advantage but not in a manipulative way, but a helpful way, both for you and for the firm.

With that said, how can marketers gain more power or influence in their firms?

**Rhonda:** You have to build that solid relationship with your firm's leadership. You have to demonstrate that you have an understanding for the firm's strategic vision and that you want to be a part of it, that you can contribute to the success of it. You have to work hard and have a passion for what you do to gain the respect of the partners and the leadership of your firm. Strive to get a seat at the table.

I'm excited to be a part of our strategic planning initiative right now. I'm on a few committees and I work with the partners. You have to demonstrate that you have a passion for your job and that you're here to help drive growth as well as work with them to provide the solutions and opportunities. Gain that respect as a key player in the firm, not just as the marketing director, but as a key player as a growth driver in the firm.

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

**Rhonda:** I have a couple of things. I'm a big believer in continuous learning. You have to read. You have to keep up with what's going on, not just *Accounting Today* but what's going on in the news and world news. Read leadership books. I love books. I read a couple of really good ones, like the one on Zappos. From the success stories of Zappos or Starbucks, you can always glean some really good marketing or leadership ideas from them. I definitely am a big believer in continuous learning, going to the AAM sessions, speaking with other professionals and always developing yourself as a professional. And, like I said earlier, make lunch dates with your professionals.



I get some great ideas at all levels, not only from the partners, but also from staff level. I hear this staff person over here is an up-and-comer, so I ask them out for coffee. I want to hear their thoughts on the firm. What do they like best? What do they hear about their clients? They love the opportunity to talk to the marketing people. Never be intimidated or afraid to do that. That puts you in a better position in the firm.

**Jean:** What is your best piece of advice for managing partners?

**Rhonda:** My managing partner and I, we joke that he'll always say, "Oh, you know there are the marketing minds and then there are the accounting minds." It's left brains and right brains. He gets that, and he depends on the whole team to come up with these creative ideas and sometimes he goes for it and sometimes he doesn't, but hey, he's the CEO that's dancing in our videos. He obviously appreciates the creativity coming out of our department, which is great.

My advice is to rely on your marketing team. Maybe you don't get it but just give them the opportunities and the tools they need to succeed. Whether it's making a small investment in your CRM system. Give them communication tools, some sponsorship, little freedom, give them a budget and allow them to do their jobs as creative marketing people, and I think the rewards are just exponential.

**Jean:** I couldn't agree more. I've asked this question many times and you're not the first to say, "Allow the marketers to do their jobs." Listen to their ideas and also give them the chance and all the tools to implement successful programs for the firm. They'll be given the opportunity.

**Rhonda:** I'll give you a great example.

Withum came up with the video idea five, six years ago. I have my monthly meetings with our managing partner and we have our Annual State of the Firm. It's when the entire firm gets together and our CEO talks about the profession, the vision for the firm, and we give out milestone and strength awards. We open up the event with a photo collage set to music. This year, one of our partners sent us a link to an NBC Today Show video. They were doing a riff of the Black Eyed Peas and he sent that to us, and he said, "Isn't this fun?"

Well, my managing partner deleted the e-mail but I kept it. At our meeting, I said, "Did you see this? I think we can do this. I think we can do this little lift up thing over in our New Brunswick office. It has three levels, we can go up and down the staircase and video it. It probably won't take that long and I think it will be really fun and different to do." I remember him looking at me and he looks back at the computer and the video, and he looks back at me and he says, "Go for it. Just put the right people on it," and that was the start of it. So, him being open to that and being over-creative, thinking differently and then look what happened, it blew the professionals away that



accountants can be cool, you know?

**Jean:** Everybody needs to check out Withum on YouTube, right?

**Rhonda:** Right! Being open to doing something different and creative. Not many people would be willing to do that. Not many managing partners would have said okay. It's cool to have that leadership who appreciates it.

**Jean:** Getting back to what you were talking earlier about culture and that being even more important going into the future. Other firms may be doing videos, but Withum was groundbreaking with that, and nobody can take that spot from you. That's the differentiator there.

**Rhonda:** It's a nice feather in our cap that we were known for our videos. It's the tone from the top, he (the partner) loved the idea to spotlight our culture and it was something different and it had to do with YouTube, and pushing out on social. He was all about it, so it was cool.

**Jean:** We've been talking today with Rhonda Maraziti of WithumSmith+Brown, the 2016 Marketer of the Year. Rhonda, congratulations again.

**Rhonda:** Thank you so much Jean. I really appreciate it.

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