

Four Factors of Successful Accounting Firm Marketers

By Jean Marie Caragher

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to interview many people, including Association for Accounting Marketing (AAM) Hall of Fame inductees, AAM Volunteers of the Year, and Marketers of the Year (an award sponsored by the CPA PRACTICE MANAGEMENT FORUM). I always ask about the factors that make accounting firm marketers successful and thought it would be interesting to examine past interviews to determine any themes to the responses. As a result, there were four factors that stood out:

1. understanding the accounting profession and your firm;
2. strategic thinking;
3. communication skills; and
4. know your own skills.

Understanding the accounting profession and your firm. “I think most accounting marketers need to pay close attention to understanding both the profession and how the firm runs,” says Brian Falony, National Account Manager, BizActions and 2013 AAM Hall of Fame inductee. “If they have a good understanding of what is going on in the profession, they will be able to adequately tell the story of how their firm can help clients with the financial issues that these clients are facing. If they understand how the firm runs, how partners are compensated, how partners are evaluated, and how the firm makes money, they are going to be in a better position when it comes to explaining how marketing can help them achieve the goals that they are going after.”

Jamie Thomas, Director of Marketing & Communications, LBA Group and 2013 Marketer of the Year agrees. “I also think it is very important that marketers understand the accounting profession and the industry. You have to understand each different department within the firm. How do we know that was a successful engagement? I think marketers need to understand every service that the firm provides, who they provide them to, and why they 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 also have to understand the fee structure.”

“Another thing is to grasp the environment we work in,” says Chris Perrino, Principal, Business Development, Barnes Dennig and Company and 2012 AAM Hall of Fame inductee. “The CPAs are all hard pressed by their clients, day in and day out, for ideas and to perform beyond just the pure compliance part of what they’re doing. They want ideas, they want insights, they want the CPA to be a sounding board and to be responsive. We have to be that same way on the other side, for the CPA.”

Strategic thinking. “Marketers have to be strategic, they have to have a little bit of an analytical persona in them,” says Donna Erbs, Marketing Director, Anders CPAs and 2012 Marketer of the Year. “I know that sounds so strange, but because we’re working with ‘numbers people’ you have to learn how to present it in ways that make sense to them. If you are not strategic in your thinking or if you’re not a little bit analytical, it’s hard to be believable in the accounting marketing realm. I believe that if we can be strategic in our presentation, strategic in our delivery, strategic in what we want to accomplish, and then show the results, show the return on investment that marketing has made in a concise, analytical way that makes sense to the accountant, that really puts us light years ahead.”

Jennifer Wilson, Co-Founder and Partner, ConvergenceCoaching, LLC and 2013 AAM Volunteer of the Year agrees. “I think marketers need to be strategic. I think they need to understand the accounting firm and the accounting profession, and that takes a while if you’re coming from another profession or you’re coming out of school because this profession is special, unique, and different. The personality of the

players is different than in most corporate environments, and the entire business is very different—who we serve, what we deliver, what we offer, the value that's possible, the service offerings, the terminology. So you might call that fundamental or the basics, but I think a lot of marketers make the mistake of not learning those things. They still try to drive change in a firm with their ideas without the credibility of understanding what it is that their firm sells, and to whom, and what the inhibitors are.”

“Marketers cannot be out there doing activities just to do it,” advises Sarah Johnson, Chief Growth Strategist, Inovautus Consulting and 2011 Volunteer of the Year. “A lot of times when they start marketing, they splatter paint against the wall and start doing a whole bunch of things. The most successful marketers are thinking about their target, the end goal, and the things that they are doing to get there as opposed to just doing activity. They are being thoughtful about how they go about doing that to make sure it's reaching the right audience, and that's going to generate better results.”

Communication skills. “You have to have incredible communication skills,” says Perrino. “Many of our friends on the accounting side of the world don't have quite the communication skills that the business developer and marketer have; they also speak a different language. As a result, communication skills are so important because when we're dealing with a new idea, a new concept, or something we want to move forward, we have to be able to articulate it as to the “why,” the “how,” the “when,” and the “how much.” Then, we have to tie that back to the ROI that we're expecting and how we plan to be accountable to that ROI—what's the number, what do we think that's going to be, how are we going to measure it? When we are successful—how do we know, what will it look like, those kinds of things; communication skills are all part of that.”

“We have to find out what our partners want through listening, evaluate what they want or need, and then give them recommendations as to what will work the best,” says Jayne Bates, Assistant Director of Marketing Development and Sales, Crowe Horwath, LLP and 2013 AAM Hall of Fame inductee.

“Marketers have to be able to sell their ideas, internally, and sell change,” says Wilson. “I think that they need to understand differentiation because most CPA firms really struggle with what makes us unique. I think that if I don't understand the profession and I don't understand what my firm does and I don't understand differentiation, I can spend millions on pro-

More Factors for Successful Accounting Marketers

Other significant factors for successful accounting marketers are included in the following quotes:

- “Marketers must be curious. What I came to quickly realize was that I could make accounting interesting, give the firm a personality, and get people excited about growing the firm. For marketing, it all added up to: positive attitude + determination = success.” *Leisa Gill, Director of Marketing for Lattimore Black Morgan & Cain, PC and 2008 AAM Hall of Fame inductee.*
- “Marketers need to be resilient. Energetic. Intelligent. Keep enthusiasm high. Create a bandwagon effect.” *Sally Glick, Chief Marketing Officer and Director of Marketing Consulting Services for Sobel & Co. and 2007 AAM Hall of Fame inductee.*
- “Strong consultative skills—excellent listener (and questioner), able to draw out a desired [measurable] result, identify the challenges to achieving it, the resources needed, and synthesize a plan to accomplish the goals.” *Scott Moore, Director of Marketing and Business Development at Dixon Hughes Goodman, LLP and 2009 Marketer of the Year.*
- “I think you have to be confident 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 grow their firm.” *Jamie Thomas, Director of Marketing & Communications, LBA Group and 2013 AAM Marketer of the Year.*

motion, but it won't be effective. So, I've really got to have those elements in place.”

Know your own skills. “Marketers need to know what they can and can't do,” says Johnson. “I think a key part of any success, regardless of whether it's marketing or otherwise, is knowing who you are, what your strengths are, and being able to say ‘I could do this but somebody else could do it a lot better.’ Then they are not afraid to bring in other people when it makes sense

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to assist them in doing things. That could be anything from graphic design to writing to coaching your partners. Those marketers know when to do that, and that's a key component."

"Know your skill set and position yourself with a firm that will allow you to use your strengths," advises Karen Love, director of practice growth, PKF Texas and 2009 AAM Hall of Fame inductee. "The firm must embrace the professionalism of a marketer. Be nimble, engaging, multi-task, and be fast to get your first success to gain credibility. Surround yourself with talented individuals who have the skills that supplement your own. Collaborate and build trust

with leadership, create a track record. You must have the ability to connect the dots and strategize. Bottom line: Listen to your good gut instinct, but be able to quantify your gut."

About the Author: Jean Marie Caragher is president of Capstone Marketing, providing marketing consulting services to CPA firms, including Brand Surgery, marketing and strategic planning, inbound marketing, retreat facilitation, and training. To read more Capstone Conversations, go to <http://capstonemarketing.com/resources/capstone-conversations>. Contact Jean at 858-737-4762 or jcaragher@capstonemarketing.com. ✦