

A Capstone Conversation With Nicole Gantz



Partner and Chief Marketing Officer
Honkamp Krueger



CAPSTONE MARKETING

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Hello, this is [Jean Caragher](#), President of [Capstone Marketing](#). I am delighted to be talking today with [Nicole Gantz](#), Marketing Partner at [Honkamp Krueger](#) and its Human Capital Management affiliate, [HKP](#), and the 2018 [Marketer of the Year](#), an award sponsored by [Inside Public Accounting](#).

Let me share two reasons why Nicole won this award. In 2014, Nicole launched a client patronage app which allows the firm's 500 employees to shop at firm clients, find locations, get driving directions, submit spending amounts and win prizes. The app, which has tracked \$14.2 million in spending, and almost 57,000 receipts submitted, increases client retention and referrals. Wow! Second, early last year, Nicole implemented a marketing automation tool and in nine months produced 58 qualified leads to business developers, which resulted in five new clients.

I could go on, but I know you would like to hear from our 2018 Marketer of the Year. Nicole, congratulations.

Nicole: Thank you, Jean. Thanks for having me.

Jean: It's my pleasure. It's so exciting when we hear solid, tangible, innovative results from accounting marketers, and you've certainly done that.

Nicole: Thank you. It's so exciting to contribute, not only to my firm but also to the industry.

Jean: I know you've been with your firm 11 years. You obviously have a lion's share of experience. What have you found to be the greatest challenge in marketing CPA firms?

Nicole: Internally, marketing is relatively new for CPA firms compared to the greater global world and the span of time. When you become an accounting marketer, especially if you're the first, you spend a lot of time teaching your partners, managers, and colleagues what marketing is and the impact and value you can add to the firm's strategic direction if they let you. Whereas, if you step into marketing at something like a Procter & Gamble, or a retail company, you're not explaining what your job is and what you do. They already know. You have to be willing to be a collaborator and really work with partners, managers, and your colleagues and teach them about what marketing is, what value you provide, how you can help them and things that you can do to really impact the bottom line.



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Externally, the challenge is that lots of people think all CPA firms are the same, there's no difference, especially with compliance services. Marketers have to work extra hard to really differentiate their firm from one CPA firm to the next. There's no way one experiences from one CPA to another would be the same. So, we have to find what our differentiators are. If there are none, we need to start creating them and advertise that to our target market and win those clients. When we get them, we need to keep them and make them raving fans of our firm, buying more services and referring business to us. There's, again, that learning curve about who our firm is and how we are different and making that work for us.

Jean: Now, you mentioned something interesting related to internally. You said, "If they let you do your job." That is key. There are firms with partner groups who truly get it and there are firms with partner groups who don't. That makes internal education that much more important.

Nicole: Absolutely. You have to be that professional that works with them to walk them through, "This is a profession. I went to college for this. I have my own association. I go to my own conferences to learn how I can apply our best practices and help our firm grow." versus being bogged down with other duties that are not related to marketing. You have to have that drive in you and you have to prove it, too. You can't just say, "We help you add to your bottom line," and you never do, or, "We help you find new leads," and you never do. You have to walk the talk and prove what marketing can do to help the firm.

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Jean: So, tell me, what are the biggest changes that you've noticed in accounting marketing over the past five years?

Nicole: No doubt to me, it's everything digital. Traditionally and stereotypically, CPA firms are usually behind the times with digital marketing, not every firm, but a good portion of them don't use it as a strong contender in their marketing media mix. Again, if there's a lot of time convincing other people that you need to be on social media marketing, that you're not just playing on Facebook at work, that you're not just lost on LinkedIn, that there's a real reason that you're on, doing what you are, that your website must be made in a responsive design website and how Google will punish you and no one will ever be able to find you if you don't have a responsive design website or that person is not going to have a great mobile experience with you if your website is not a responsive design. That you need a CRM. You can't use Excel to track your leads.



And, yes, data can be messy and there are a million excuses not to use our CRM, but it is the right thing to do to invest in that CRM.

All of these are very obvious things that the retail market and B2C companies are doing. We have to stop thinking that we're different and that we shouldn't be doing these things because we're a professional service, we're accounting. We really just need to own digital marketing. It's not really digital marketing anymore, it's just marketing, and getting beyond that. Those are the things that I've seen in the past five years. I think our associations have done an excellent job of getting it in front of us and getting on the forefront of all this and making us aware of it. It's networking with your peers, going to your association meetings and contributing so you're learning, "You can make this work in our industry and I need to go back and do that."

Jean: It's interesting the comments you just made about CRM. It is forever a topic of conversation because there are firms doing it right and a lot of firms who are using their Excel spreadsheet. The career and compensation survey we just did, the marketing assistant role, one of their top five activities was managing the CRM or the database. We know what a challenging job that can be, managing all of that data.

Nicole: Absolutely. That just can no longer be the excuse not to implement a CRM. It's just as tedious in Excel, but at least a CRM allows you to send targeted, timely messages to not only your clients, but your prospects. You can measure everything that is happening when you use a CRM, and the proper email marketing campaign, to do marketing automation. You can see who's opening your emails, what they are clicking on, send them to customized landing pages, collect and nurture leads until they become clients. You can't do that in Excel. It's well worth the investment. I was able to nurture leads and bring new business into the firm by getting our CRM integrated with our Salesforce database.

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Jean: What do you use for your CRM?

Nicole: We use [Pardot](#), which is a [Salesforce](#) product. We thoroughly vetted a lot of marketing automation products including the most popular ones like [HubSpot](#), and we felt like there were a lot of benefits to keeping it with the same company.

Jean: That makes total sense. What's your prediction for accounting marketing for the next five years?

Nicole: Well, one topic I am very passionate about is that accounting marketers have to lead the way to make our firms more attractive for that next generation of buyers. Some



Millennials are already 37 years old. Some are the decision makers in companies. They're becoming controllers, HR execs, they're really close to becoming CFOs. A lot of rising stars are already in the decision-making mode about where they're going to buy professional services. Accounting marketers have to lead the way to make our CPA firms a place Millennials and Generation Z want to buy from and to stay with. I know [Jennifer Wilson](#) speaks on this topic also, but it's something I'm very passionate about. Accounting marketers have to lead the way because no one else is going to sit around and say, "Oh, should we have a mobile app?" or, "Oh, my client likes to text me at 10 o'clock at night. Should I be responding to them?" We just have to change our mindset on the way people are going to buy from us in the future.

Jean: How do you think it impacts your partners and managers, and the generation that they're in, when relating to these millennial CEOs and CFOs?

Nicole: It's very similar to what our firms have been going through in the past two years, and that is attracting and retaining millennial team members. We've all read about it, and gone to conferences, and are trying to shift our firms to have more flexible work environments, invest in more technology, and provide work-life balance. It's the same. These clients want the same thing. They may not want to actually come into our firm anymore, they may not want to spend five hours on a golf course with us anymore. They may want to be texting with us, they may want to say, "Do you have an app so I can track where my tax return is at?" They may want to digitize client experience.

We have to be willing to be more flexible when working with these clients. There's a myth that Millennials are not loyal customers. I believe that's untrue. You have to win their loyalty, and you can do that by providing high quality advisory services. You have to make a raving fan out of them so that they tell everybody on social media what a great firm you are and help you get referrals. It's very similar to the way we've been trying to adjust our firms to be more millennial employee-friendly. As team members, we have to do the same thing with our customers.

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Jean: It's an interesting time, isn't it? With everything going on in this industry and this issue with the Millennials, that next generation of buyers, it's absolutely relevant. In your networking, within [AAM](#) and your other associations, you have a vast network of other accounting marketers. What factors or skills have you noticed that enable accounting marketers to be successful?

Nicole: I would say their passion, not only for the marketing field itself, but for what all of our firms do. When you collect testimonials, do some storytelling on your clients, do case studies, do client satisfaction interviews, you hear the way our CPA firms help



clients, their families, their businesses, and their employees, it's incredibly rewarding. Everyone I know that's been in this business a long time, has advanced, has a lot of talent, gives back to the younger marketers, and has an incredible amount of passion for what our firms do for our communities. They create jobs, they create wealth in their communities, they give back to the communities and they just absolutely love that. That's one thing that they have in common.

They're excellent at collaborating. They don't work in silos. They don't think they know better than anyone else. They're really good at working in teams. They can go to an audit department, then they can go over to tax, to advisory, to computer consulting. They can work with anyone and be collaborators and bring people together and help knock down the silos at CPA firms.

A lot of my friends are very good at surrounding themselves with very talented people. Whether it's hiring and developing your own people, or partnering with the right consultant in the industry, or a combination of both, which is what I do, and dare to shift, you don't know it all. Then, when you do know it all, you should be passing it on to those around you and developing your team. So, the people I know are just really good at picking and choosing who they work with and then sharing that success altogether.

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Jean: That's such an interesting comment you just made. When you do know it all, you should be passing it on. So, that's an enhancing skill but then it's also providing time for you to learn that next thing.

Nicole: Absolutely. It'd be selfish to keep all that knowledge to yourself. We lecture our own partners and their succession plan to pass on their knowledge. It is our duty to do the same during our entire career and to develop our very talented teams.

Jean: Right. Otherwise, wouldn't you feel like your head would just burst with information and things going on? Oh, my goodness.

Nicole: Yeah. I mean, when you do that, then you can do things like take a vacation.

Jean: Wow. That's a great concept.

Nicole: And maybe checking your email for only one hour a day instead of four. So, if anything, it allows you to take a vacation.

Jean: Now, I know that you were named a partner in your firm at the beginning of this year, congratulations on that.



Nicole: Thank you.

Jean: I know it's something that many marketers strive to do. That's a wonderful outcome of your hard work. Tell me, which of your personal skills has contributed most to your success?

Nicole: Anyone that knows me knows the answer I'm about to give because I believe firmly in this, and that is grit. The reason I use grit is because it's a comprehensive word that describes so many qualities of a successful leader. Again, being in accounting marketing can be the very first position for somebody – they don't have a predecessor – and so they really need that courage and the strength to work through their goals and collaborate with the partners of the firm to make some magic happen. That does take grit to get through the day or get through the early stages when people don't understand what you do, why you're there, and how you contribute to the success. So, you really do need that, to put your plan into action.

Grit [is] a comprehensive word that describes so many qualities of a successful leader.

Then, when you have grit, you have this strength of character and you have that hard work ethic, you're gonna become well respected by the other partners and managers and colleagues at the firm, therefore, getting support of your marketing programs. So, having that grit gets you through your day and helps you succeed in your goals. Then, you're just gonna build a nice reputation for being a very successful marketing person with a strong work ethic.

Jean: How do you think marketers could gain more power or influence within their firms? Is it, again, just having that grit or is there even more to it?

Nicole: Well, it's speaking up. Anyone that knows me knows this, I'm not shy about this one. So, traditional, because I got my college degree in the '90s, I know that this has been replaced, but there I was taught the four P's of marketing, right? Most marketers at CPA firms concentrate on promotion, okay? So, anything that has to do with promoting their services, promoting the firm, promoting it as a great place to work.

That's wonderful, but I think what you need to do to really advance is to focus on the other P's. What products and services does your firm offer? What do you have great realization on? What do you have great expertise on? What industry niches, what service niches should you be offering in advance and being a part of that place? Where should you be offering your services? And, in today's world, you could offer your services globally. Should you do as a resource for that? Should you focus on a region, a



certain part of the country? So, where do you offer your services and how are you gonna go about doing that?

Then finally, pricing. As our CPA firms try and move to innovative or value pricing, I think marketers can play a great role and helping out how to re-price the way CPA firms charge for services. So, just speaking up and saying, "I have an interest beyond... Yes, I will do all the promotion, that's my job." But there's more to marketing than just advertising and social media marketing, communications, and PR and so on and so forth. It's also contributing to that. Before you know it, you're involved in M&A, you're involved in the development of other services that bring in revenue. Then, before you know it, you're advancing up the ladder because people see you more than just the person who makes merchandise and throws great events.

Jean: So, let's think of a marketer in a firm and, perhaps, their department of one or maybe two, and their partners see them in that promotional role and not products or pricing. Is your advice forge ahead despite that feeling and show them what you can do, or what approach would you offer to them?

Nicole: One thing I do is I have a monthly meeting with our CEO, Greg Burbach. During that time, I will use opportunities to talk to him about things that I've learned either at conferences or I've read in Accounting Today, read in Inside Public Accounting, Journal of Accountancy, and my marketing journals. I share things beyond just promotion. I saw Ron Baker speak at one of the AICPA ENGAGE conferences. He goes, "You saw Ron, but you chose to go see Ron Baker on pricing." It's doing things like that. So, no, I'm not saying, "Hey, Greg, add me to the Pricing Committee because I said so." That's not the way it works. It's that collaboration and showing that I have interest in this, or if I read about somebody else doing something in some industry niche, sharing that information with him, emailing interesting articles that are outside of marketing and say, "I saw this. You may have already seen it, but I thought I'd share just in case you didn't." Just showing that I have an interest in this.

It's that collaboration and showing that I have interest in this, or if I read about somebody else doing something in some industry niche, sharing that information with him, emailing interesting articles that are outside of marketing.

When we do talk, usually, marketers are incredibly trusted people, so they will talk in front of you about this and just chiming in and not just being there to listen, but also to say, "Hey, have you ever thought about this?" or, "Hey, I was thinking about this," or, "This may be crazy. I'm just throwing this out there about that." It's just a real subtle way of bringing yourself to the table, and before you know it, you're at the table.

Jean: Wonderful.



Nicole: The second part of that is, on the promotion part of it, is doing as many revenue-driving activities as you possibly can, such as events that not only bring in new business, but cross-sell to current clients. Get yourself in those high-value proposals, email marketing that can bring in leads, SEO, social media marketing bringing in leads, and helping to nurture them throughout their time turning them into new business. So, not forgetting about the promotion part, but trying to focus most of your energy on things that bring in revenue to the firm.

Jean: And to quantify as much as you can because we know the CPAs love to see those numbers and statistics. Whatever you could put a number to, go ahead and do it.

Nicole: Absolutely. Excellent point.

Jean: Let's expand on that and tell me what your best piece of advice is for accounting marketers.

Nicole: To just not work in a silo. To really align yourself with the overall firm's growth strategies and business goals and making sure the marketing department is being a key department, making that happen and communicating about what you are doing to help contribute to the overall firm success. Being a partner with the other departments and firm leadership, being helpful and valuable to them, so they don't know what they would do without you and they wouldn't get there without you.

Jean: Finally, what is your best piece of advice for managing partners?

Nicole: First, if you do have a professional marketer on your team, I congratulate them for recognizing that a true marketing professional is integral to their growth and to do everything in their power to help keep the marketing professional, giving them the resources and the respect to prove that they can be a real contributor to your goals, and definitely hold them responsible and accountable to the high standards that they have for everybody else as they should be no different. If they do have the right person on the bus, they should be receiving a return on their investment with that marketer's contributions to their bottom line. So, they'll prove themselves if they have the right person on the bus.

Jean: Excellent. Let me ask you then, for the managing partners who may not have hired that marketing professional yet, when do you think a firm is ready to make that hire?

Nicole: In my opinion, it's when they're ready to grow. If they wanna grow and not get left behind and grow certainly organically, they really do need a marketing professional on staff. That marketing professional can help bring in some new online leads, can help email market to cross-sell to current clients, have events to help cross-sell to current clients, really pay attention to some high value proposing and add some value to them.



They will easily pay for themselves by just focusing on those activities and then being allowed to focus on those type of activities. If they want to grow and then definitely grow organically and not just be bought out, they really should have a marketing professional on staff.

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Jean: Excellent advice. So, I think we can all tell now ... even the sound of your voice and the tone of your voice, I can tell that you have the passion for what you do, which is things that you've noticed in other successful marketers. So, we can...

Nicole: Yeah. Well, Honkamp Krueger is an excellent company, excellent leadership, very entrepreneurial, and I have the best... I know everyone says this, but I really do have the best marketing team in the business at Honkamp Krueger. My team is incredibly talented and amazing, and so this is really Honkamp Krueger marketing department recognition because they're the best and I'll just... I'll leave it at that. I don't wanna get all choked up, but they're the best.

Jean: That's wonderful. So, we've been talking today with Nicole Gantz, Marketing Partner at Honkamp Krueger and its Human Capital Management Affiliate, HKP and the 2018 Marketer of the Year. Nicole, congratulations again.

Nicole: Thank you, Jean.

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Jean Caragher

Capstone Marketing

jcaragher@capstonemarketing.com

<http://www.capstonemarketing.com>

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

Connect with Jean:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jeancaragher>

[@JeanCaragher](#)

<https://www.facebook.com/capstonemarketing/>

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



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