

A Capstone Conversation With Nicole Sterling



Director of Marketing and Communications
RSW Accounting and Consulting



CAPSTONE MARKETING

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Hello, this is [Jean Caragher](#), President of [Capstone Marketing](#). I am delighted to be talking today with Nicole Sterling, Director of Marketing and Communications for [RSW Accounting and Consulting](#), and the [2017 Association for Accounting Marketing Volunteer of the Year](#). If you've been to [AAM](#)'s website in the past year, you've no doubt seen Nicole's and her committee's efforts first hand, from the new profile badges, to launching the marketer's library, to building new sections and functionality. She is constantly finding ways to maximize use [accountingmarketing.org](#), [AAM Connect](#) and the [AAM portal](#). Nicole's most recent project was leading the efforts with the blog sub-committee to launch the new [AAM blog](#). Congratulations, Nicole, on being named AAM's Volunteer of the Year.

Nicole: Thank you so much. It's a great honor.

Jean: AAM is an organization that we both know and love. Everyone appreciates your efforts.

Nicole: I've been involved with AAM for quite a while now and it's an amazing group of people that you get to work with.

Jean: You're obviously into the industry and accounting marketing and your network. What is your thought about the greatest challenge in marketing CPA firms?

Nicole: The greatest challenge is trying to push to continuously be innovative for our firms and spark creativity in the workplace. As a marketer, we have to sell our creative ideas and stay innovative and moving along. Our partners don't always grasp the creative side of things that are needed to support growth in a firm. You need to be able to get that idea across to them on why it's important to do it in a specific way and keep those new ideas moving.

Jean: How do you do that? You have this new idea that you want to propose, what's your strategy or process with your partners?

Nicole: I'm very direct. Growing up in New York you become that way. I will actually lay it out fully in an outline for them on the benefits, the cons, any problem they might encounter and why they should do it in a specific way and why I believe it should be done that way. I will sit down with them at the partners meeting in the beginning and then just ask questions and they fire away at me on why they should do it this way. If I



can get it across to everyone at the same time so they completely understand why it has to go this way and not another way, then the acceptance level will be there.

Jean: Interesting, because it is important to get their buy in. We have to put ourselves in their shoes. Imagine how they are receiving what we're trying to tell them.

Nicole: They are there for the numbers and the analytics part of the job and I'm there to be the creative side. Sometimes they don't necessarily always see what I'm trying to do or why I'm trying to do things a certain way. I had an instance where we were looking at packaging for estate planning and they kept telling me, "You cannot make packages for estate plans." When I mapped it out and showed them that we could, the light bulb went on for all of them. That aha moment happened.

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Jean: You try to make it visual for them so they could actually see what you're describing.

Nicole: People are both the analytical and the visual side. I try to put both when I present something to them, so that anybody that needs the visual aids for it will see it laid out very clearly but also all of the detail will be there for the people that need that type of information.

Jean: That's great advice. Think about the last five years. What are the biggest changes that you've noticed in accounting marketing?

Nicole: It's definitely digital marketing. The web, technology, the use of the data that we gather from these technologies and the efforts that we do. The different social media channels that have come about and have been more widely used in the accounting marketing area, blogs, webinars, videos on websites, videos on YouTube channels, etc. We've vastly changed the way that we market our services in the accounting industry in the last five years for sure.

Jean: What has been the reaction of your partners in your firm with this shift to digital and social? Do they understand the part it plays in your mix?

Nicole: They didn't at first. I will be honest. I had to pull them along by their hair a little bit to get them to see, because this isn't what they're trained to do. They're trained to make sure that they analyze the numbers and the figures, and this is my job. In the beginning, they didn't see the need for social media. Why would we have a video testimonial? Why would we do webinars? They didn't get the concept of it and over time they started to see the value in it, and now they see the value in it. It just took time to get them to understand why an accounting firm would use Facebook or have a



LinkedIn page. In the beginning, it was a waste of time for them and now they're constantly sending me things to put out on social media channels.

Jean: I would have to think they trust you in what you are suggesting and what you're recommending that the firm do.

Nicole: Obviously, the only way for a marketer to hold their weight in a firm is to become a trusted advisor. Just as these guys are trusted advisors to their clients, I have to be a trusted advisor to them. That's the way that we play our role, at least in our firm here in Montreal, Canada. I don't advise them how to do an audit, nor would they want me to. The same goes as they don't try to advise me on how marketing should be done. They know I understand it and I need to make them understand why we have to do things a certain way.

Jean: That's an excellent point. Each person is working towards their skills. They've got to trust in you and you have to trust in them. That's a perfect situation.

Nicole: If your partners don't trust you as the marketer or you don't trust your partners to help you along as a marketer, the relationship is going to be broken. It's going to be very hard to be successful in anything that you do at that point.

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Jean: Let me jump ahead a bit because this is dove-tailing into a question about the skills or factors that enable accounting marketers to be successful. Clearly, I'd have to think that your response about they're becoming trusted advisors in their firms is one of those factors.

Nicole: You have to gain their trust and the only way to gain their trust is to earn it. You have to show what you know, that you know it's going to be successful, here are the reasons why but you need to do just as you would in any valued relationship with a client. You need to gain their trust and they need to look at you as that advisor that they can go to with any kind of issue or problem they might have.

As marketers we're answering our partners' pain points within their business. There is a problem they need us to figure out how to bypass, to fix it, to make it better. They have to trust me and I have to trust them in order for the relationship to fully work.

Jean: What other skills or factors would you say enable marketers to be successful?

Nicole: Marketers have to be able to step forward and not be afraid to take a risk. Know your strengths and weaknesses and be able to embrace your limitations. You can't know everything there is to know about marketing. There is nobody that does but you have to



be able to say, "I know where I am limited." Reach out to your colleagues, your network, whoever it may be and say, "This is not an area of my expertise but it's yours. What's the course of action we should take?" You need to be able to embrace those limitations.

Jean: That's where AAM plays such a big role for all of us.

Nicole: It's amazing the amount of unbelievably knowledgeable people I've met in many different areas of marketing through AAM.

Jean: And a willingness to share. AAM has always been like that. You meet people and they are more than willing to share information with you and what they've done.

Nicole: There are people within AAM that become mentors to you and you wind up mentoring other people that you meet along the way. It's not a formal relationship. It's just you've created a bond, this relationship, and you feel comfortable enough to ask them questions or they feel comfortable enough to ask you. It's a great opportunity to enhance your skills, too. I've learned so much since I've been involved with AAM.

Jean: Which one of your personal skills contributes most to your success?

Nicole: It's my ability to listen and to pinpoint what the needs are. I need to listen with both ears and find out exactly where that pain point is, whether that's with my partners or the billable hours I do in my firm with clients. It's the ability to listen and pick up on what it is and then determine a course of action. I'm also very driven. I'm not often afraid to step outside of the box and drag my colleagues and partners along with me to try new things. You have to try new things and take risks in order to be successful. I'm also not afraid to give my opinion and share my ideas. I'm very passionate about things and very highly organized.

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Jean: I could tell that from the tone of your voice.

Nicole: I am hyper organized, which also helps me ensure details are taken care of. Sometimes that scares people but it's just how I am. Those would be the skills that have made me successful.

Jean: How can marketers gain more power or influence within their firms?

Nicole: Marketers have to prove their worth to their partners. Show them that they know what they need to do and what they are going to do for their firm and win their trust. Just as I said before, just as any other advisor would do. If you want to have a long-term relationship with a client, you need to be a trusted advisor to them. That's



what marketers need to be within their firm to their partners and their managing partner.

At the same time, you have to go and ask for a seat at that table. That table means the partners' table when they're having their meetings. We're not CPA's. I have a business degree on top of my marketing degree. I do understand the mindset of a CPA. I've taken accounting in university and gone through three years of accounting, but a lot of times we don't understand each other, marketers and CPA's don't necessarily tow along the same lines.

We don't understand what the other one is doing in the business, and the only way to understand the full picture of what's happening is to have a seat at that table, and you need to ask for that.

Jean: That's a great point. All of us need to have our own goals, what we want to achieve, and to figure out what we need to do to achieve that overall goal and make it happen for ourselves and not to be waiting around for somebody else to make it happen.

Nicole: You don't want to wait around and make it happen or wait for somebody else to make it happen for you. Especially in these times, marketers are often hybrids in the different roles in the firms. In my role in the firm, not only do I do marketing but I cross over into HR and business development. I need to have that seat at the table to get a full picture of what's happening in the firm in order to re-evaluate our strategies on a continuous basis. If you're not revisiting those, you're not being innovative and you're not making sure that things are going up properly according to the plans. You have to constantly adjust your plan according to what's happening at the time.

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Jean: Earlier, we talked about the focus on digital, data and social media in the past five years. Think five years into the future. What is your prediction for accounting marketing?

Nicole: A lot of the accounting marketing is going to be advisory services and specializations. Niche marketing will be a huge part of firm innovation and it's all a way to help you differentiate yourself from the competition. People and businesses are not only looking for compliance services, but they're looking for somebody to help them grow their business and show them what they need to do in order to be successful, and to have the right amount of money for when they exit out of that business and retire. They are looking for advisory services. They're looking for that value add from their accountants and their advisors.



If you're trusted in that relationship with the client, they're going to come to you and ask you, "Do you know somebody that offers this service?" And at that point, if you can say, "We do," then that's a win, win for both of you.

Jean: Especially with all we're reading about artificial intelligence, and block chain, and robots auditing. We need to be preparing for these technological changes and determine what will the role of the CPA be in the future.

Nicole: Exactly, and as a marketer, you should determine with those changes how you're going to market those types of things. If a robot comes into your company and is now working within to do audits or in HR or whatever it may be doing, how do you market that? How do you let people know that you're that innovative of a firm that you're doing things differently in order to cut time down and to be more efficient. You have to look constantly at how you're going to market these things that are happening within the industry.

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

Nicole: You need to know your strengths and weaknesses and be able to look at those and be honest about them. You can't always be the best at everything that you set out to do. It's just not a possibility. When you embrace that and you can know the point to go and ask a colleague or someone in your network for advice or help, then that is the best way for you to become better with what you do.

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Jean: What would your best piece of advice be for managing partners?

Nicole: The best advice for them is two pronged: look forward into the future, five years, 10 years down the road and where the industry may be going and trying new things. At the same time, you have to embrace failure. Nobody wants to fail. When you fail, it's your first attempt in learning something. No marketing campaign is 100% successful the first time you do it unless you get super lucky. You have ROI and the next time you look at it, you want to improve it. It might not have happened the best way the first time but you have to look at that "failure" as a learning process, and that's what managing partners have to do.

Sometimes success can be a lousy teacher. When you're successful, people often keep doing the same thing repeatedly. It worked once, it will work again. That's a slippery slope because it doesn't teach you how to be inventive. Survival today requires that you do more than just tread water. You need to constantly be changing in order to stay ahead of the competition.



Jean: I particularly like that term you used of embracing failure.

Nicole: You have to embrace that. Failure is not a four-letter word. You're learning from it.

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Jean: I would agree because I always feel that if we're not making mistakes, we're not trying to do anything different. It's just like you said, we're just doing the same thing repeatedly because we know how to do it.

Nicole: And if you stay stagnant too long, you become stale and obsolete. You must constantly reinvent yourself, reinvent your firm, and do things differently in order to stay ahead of the competition.

Jean: We've been talking today with Nicole Sterling, director of Marketing and Communications for RSW, accounting and consulting, and AAM's 2017, Volunteer of the Year. Nicole, congratulations.

Nicole: Thank you so much, Jean. It was great talking to you.

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