

# Growth Strategies

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The Journal of Accounting Marketing and Sales

## Walking a Blended Line: The Changing Roles of Marketing and Business Development

Fostering Emotional Intelligence In Accounting Firms

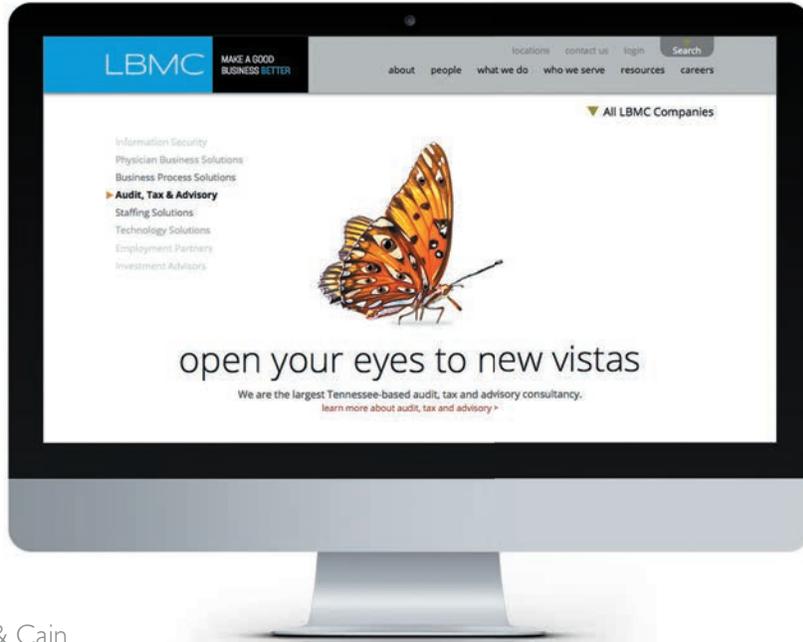
Client Experience: A New Frontier in an Accounting Marketer's Career Path

Marketers: Be Aware and Unique

Budgeting for Success



# A NEW BRAND HELPS MAKE *a good business* better



Lattimore Black Morgan & Cain is Tennessee's largest accounting firm, having grown to more than 400 professionals in the past 30 years. As the firm was transitioning to a second generation of leaders, they realized their own success had spawned market confusion. The firm was known both as Lattimore Black and LBMCMark. Over 10 LLCs created even greater dissonance with their own names. All would profit from their association with Lattimore Black but the association was weak at best; at worst, non-existent. We urged the firm to settle on "LBMCMark" for the parent company name and build its services under a family of brands following the integrated model familiar in, for example, SONY products.



Individual websites were sustained but were relaunched with the look and feel of the LBMCMark parent site. All were navigable from that single site. We touched everything—digital properties, business materials, brochure system, advertisements, eAlerts, PowerPoint presentations, etc. Now that's how to "make a good business better." There's wit and charm in the brand—in its voice and imagery. Long-winded brochures were scrapped in favor of four-panel brochures for all the companies. Services were described in simple sell-sheets. Everything was rewritten. A total makeover top to bottom.

# From the Editor



Predictions—we all love them...love to make them...love to hear others make them...and love to endlessly ponder their possibilities and ramifications. We can't change the past, but the future is wide open, and we all have a stake in it, so predictions – at least well-informed, reasonable ones – offer a glimpse at what lies ahead.

The accounting marketing profession has changed drastically in the past several years. We are seeing marketing departments grow and charged with more responsibilities. It seems like there's more pressure on accounting marketing professionals than ever before. But the savvy marketers will adapt and find new and innovative ways to meet those challenges.

While I can't say for sure where our profession will be in 10 years, recent marketing, accounting and technological trends lead me to some conclusions about what will drive marketing in the future for our firms—and what needs to be answered as well. Some key challenges include:

**Emotional Intelligence (EI)** – We should be recognizing the importance of EI on organizational performance (including revenue growth), and harnessing its power for the benefit of your firm.

**Client Experience** – Key to our firms' success is the continuing emphasis on the client experience, especially given the constantly evolving tools at our disposal. At the core, this is still a relationship-driven profession, so ask yourself what your firm is doing to meet this challenge.

**Communication** – Professional marketers must be competent communicators—we must capture and project our firm's collective voice in order to articulate its unique value. How do you currently do that? Could you do better? Are you telling your audiences what you do, or are you showing how you can solve their problems?

In this issue you'll also hear from the 2016 AAM Rookies of the Year. Their unique insights and perspectives on the accounting marketing profession give us a glimpse of what is to come.

Successful firms have always been willing to look into the future and do what's necessary to stay ahead of the curve. That will continue to hold true as we move forward—especially given exponential advances in technology and communication mediums.

I welcome your thoughts on this subject—and any of your predictions for the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt Seitz".

Matthew Seitz,  
Executive Editor

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# Walking a Blended Line: The Changing Roles of Marketing and Business Development

Jennifer Kernan, *The Rainmaker Companies*, Nina Ullrich, *PBMares, LLP*, and Debra Helwig, *K·Coe Isom*



It may seem dramatic to say that the accounting industry is poised on a quaking precipice, with firms that don't adapt to the changes rocking the mountain risking a plunge to an unceremonious doom, but the reality is, it's not that far from the truth. Technology is pushing firms faster and further than ever, making traditional roles obsolete and forcing change at the speed of light. Firms that adapt will "grow wings" and soar; those that don't will trip and slide and possibly even swan dive in a spiral of obscurity, client dissatisfaction and waning profits.



In this tumultuous environment, as firms struggle to keep up or catch up, more pressure than ever is being placed on the "marketing and business development" function. We're seen first as the communicators, the makers of magic and the ones with the key to the potential client's heart. Ah, clients! Firms have come to rely on us to know where to find them, how to woo them and how to keep them—all while keeping the firm's reputation and quality



front and center in the public eye. This makes us coaches, and writers, and designers, and strategists, and relationship builders, and, and, and... The list is complex and enormous, and it grows exponentially every year.

The conundrum comes in balancing the stuff we CAN do with what we NEED to do. Every firm views marketing and business development differently, and every firm gives different latitude and responsibility to the person who sits in the lead marketing/BD role. To some extent, it's a nod to the complexity of what we're being asked to do. In some cases it's a reflection of the needs, size and/or sophistication of the firm itself. But the end result is a lot of confusion about what skills we as professionals need to have in order to be successful in the future. Leaders of the firms that want to be best-in-class aren't sure of what systems to put in place to manage marketing and sales.

To cut through the confusion and glimpse what the future holds, we talked to a handful of leaders across the country with a wide range of different titles and responsibilities. Each, however, with similar perspectives on what really matters on the path to creating a firm known as a client acquisition powerhouse:

- ✓ **Chris Perrino**, Principal, Barnes Dennig ([www.barnesdennig.com](http://www.barnesdennig.com))
- ✓ **Melissa Gracey**, Director of Marketing, Berkowitz Pollack Brant ([www.bpbcpa.com](http://www.bpbcpa.com))
- ✓ **Jason Jobgen**, Strategic Alliances, BKD ([www.bkd.com](http://www.bkd.com)).
- ✓ **J. Eustis Corrigan, Jr.**, CPA, Senior Managing Director, CBIZ MHM ([www.mhmcpa.com](http://www.mhmcpa.com))
- ✓ **Nina Ullrich**, Marketing Coordinator, PBMares ([www.pbmares.com](http://www.pbmares.com))

## A Gamut of Roles for Individuals

Even among our interviewees, we found the focus and responsibility to vary widely for each individual—but however the divisions fall, it appears the same tasks need to be accomplished.

Jason Jobgen and Chris Perrino, who serve strictly in business development-focused roles for their firms, deep dive into identifying and managing opportunities, from introduction to close, as well as maintaining one-on-one communications with prospects and clients. In fact, Perrino calls himself a "sales guy," and though the marketing department falls under his leadership, he focuses much more of his personal attention on business development rather than traditional marketing activities. "We all use the CRM, but it's not up to me to work on the website; that's marketing," he says.

Both Jobgen and Perrino agree that they rely on their marketing teams to "stay ahead of the industry" and keep them informed and trained in what is happening in technology and new marketing strategies. For them, marketing serves as an "internal consultant," often brainstorming business development ideas and processes, and assisting with execution. By

having marketing as a partner, they can provide a dedicated focus on creating growth opportunities.

Melissa Gracey, as director of marketing, plays more of an innovative, creative execution role, while building lead generation activities for business development in her firm. "I was originally brought in to manage branding needs," she says, "and I came from an agency, so this was familiar territory. Once I got integrated into the firm, however, gaps in business development and partner coaching were obvious, and I migrated into that role as well. Being a coach is the most gratifying thing for me." Nonetheless, the firm also needs her to be a visionary, articulate the brand, and keep the wheels of communication turning—and she spins all those plates with remarkable grace.



Note that in every case, the same activities need to be managed: branding, communication, lead generation and coaching. The differences lie in whether the activities are focused in one role or in teams, and whether the marketing staff and business development staff have equal weight, or one team reports to the other. In our small sample, the trend seems to be that the lead role is either combined or focused on business development, with "traditional marketing" staff providing support to those who hold direct responsibility for practice growth.

## A Blend Emerging

The consensus is that marketing still retains its pride of place; but the intense need of firms to concentrate on business development activities is tipping the scale to push marketing professionals deeper into the sales process.

One of the first pre-conference sessions offered at AAM Summit 2016 was Improving Integration of Sales / Business Development with Marketing to Maximize Firm Growth. This session, co-led by Scott Moore of The Rainmaker Companies and Perrino, talked clearly about how business development and marketing leaders must work together to bring new business to the firm. The bottom line is that the goal is to "target clients, discover needs, align solutions and close the deal," and marketers must be integrated into the conversation. These goals have been met in different ways by sales and marketing in the past, but the need now is to merge the two at some level for firms to be successful.

Eustis Corrigan called this discussion of blending the two roles "a very timely topic." At his firm, he works hard with his team to bridge the gap between business development and marketing by making sure that everyone is working together to bring in new business. "I have experienced throughout the years that marketing and sales have not been entirely aligned, but that has changed dramatically in recent months. There are definitely different styles, personalities and egos that come into play, but in our firm we've created more of an environment of collaboration and communication to overcome it. We are finding the right approach to help business development align with marketing in order to increase and upscale our services."

"It's a culture shift," says Gracey. "When marketing is done right, it creates the environment for business development to succeed. If it is disjointed, it doesn't help with prospects. Marketing is like air conditioning—when it isn't working, you notice! And when it is working, it gives more credibility to the marketing team to have a voice to coach and lead on the business development side as well."

"It's impossible for one side to function without the other," says Jobgen. "There is a place out there for pure business development and marketing roles, but we'll continue to share more and more responsibilities as our firms evolve."

## Similar Skills Required

If you currently sit in a pure marketing role, and the idea of working with business development strikes fear in your heart, here's some great news: Our interviewees say the skills needed to succeed are very much the same. Perrino recalls, "I received a call from someone who was very experienced in marketing who was being asked to serve in a business development role in her firm. I assured her that many of the same skills she applied in marketing the firm are used in business development."

For example, there are personality traits that both sides share, such as extrovert tendencies and curiosity—both of which are important in building relationships. Marketers research whether or not a particular event is a good avenue

in which to attract clients, or if website content is speaking to the correct audience. Business developers learn all they can about prospects before meeting them, and they work to understand what marketing materials can best be used to further attract each client. Now imagine: This can be one and the same person, or a leader of multiple teams, whose goal is researching, building relationships and using targeted material to close the deal. It's all the same work—identifying and building relationships that lead to more business.

What's more, the overall approach from the marketing and business development sides of the house are converging today. Gale Crosley, CPA, founder of Crosley+Company, strongly urges in her co-authored book *“At the Crossroads: The Remarkable CPA Firm that Nearly Crashed”* that both the business development lead and marketing representative be involved in prospect meetings. There is a much greater chance of prospect meetings ending successfully when both areas are armed with the same information and fully understand the prospect.

## What's Required

No matter where your role lies on the marketing-business development continuum today, your eventual success involves a few important factors that are shared by everyone we interviewed:

**Flexibility.** Jobgen, Gracey and Perrino all emphasize that a huge key to success is staying flexible. It's not enough to bring your great skills to the table—you have to look with a critical eye at what is truly needed in marketing and/or business development in your firm and work to make it happen. All of these folks started in roles very different than where they are today. But by disciplining their focus on providing growth opportunities, they've scaled and changed as the firm's needs have changed. Now they are all viewed as key architects in their firm's success.

**Executive Support.** It's not enough to be passionate. Being able to execute on your passion means, first and foremost, having the support of firm leadership. Being in any business development or marketing role requires a willingness and ability to throw ideas on the wall to see if they can stick. Additionally, the ability to openly talk through ideas and flush them out is critical. Jobgen says it best: “Not all of my ideas are brilliant. But our leadership always ensures that the voices of me and my team are heard. What BKD does extremely well is create an environment in which all of us can collaborate as a team in order to come up with the best solutions.” The ability to bring ideas that are truly considered, and receive unbiased input from the firm, is essential to your ability to provide excellent and lasting solutions.

**Relationships.** Whether internally with fellow team members or externally with clients and prospects, relationship-

building is essential to accomplishment. “It is important to create credibility, and that takes time,” says Gracey. “And if you have a great relationship, whether internal or external, you have the opportunity to assess needs and bring the solutions to fill them.” That's a formula that works both internally for marketing and externally for business development. The mutual marketing/BD goals of how to target clients, discover needs, align solutions and close the deal all start with building trust—and trust starts with a relationship, every time.

## Into the Future

As it turns out, it's never really been about the title after all. For our interviewees, it didn't matter what role they started with. Where they are now is entirely derived from their ability to forecast and execute on opportunities that provide success, wherever on the marketing-business development continuum that may lie.

So whether you are in a marketing role, a hybrid role or a true business development role today, our research and interviews show that you probably won't be in exactly the same place in the future. As firms shift, roles are shifting, too. The consistently more difficult end goal of finding, acquiring and serving clients will require us all to work together and do whatever work is needed now, regardless of which “side of the aisle” that work lies on. We must collaborate more, take down the communications and ego barriers that used to divide marketing from sales and (perhaps most of all) never get too comfortable with the status quo.

If you need help expanding your thinking, AAM is in the process of developing a full track on Business Development for the 2017 Summit in conjunction with the American Institute of CPAs (AICPA). This new track will not only help business development and marketing leaders understand each other's roles more clearly, but will truly show that the future of business development and marketing working together (and sometimes being the same person!) will generate opportunities for unlimited success.

## About the Authors

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*Nina Ullrich joined PBMares LLP, a U.S. Top 100 accounting and business consulting firm serving clients nationally and internationally from offices in the Mid-Atlantic, in January 2016 and serves in both Marketing and BD roles.*

*Debra Helwig is Growth & Communications Manager for Top 100 accounting & consulting firm KCoE Isom. Previously she was Global Marketing Director for PrimeGlobal, a leading accounting association.*

# Fostering Emotional Intelligence In Accounting Firms

Laura Sparks, *Creative Sparks, LLC*



*Emotions don't belong in an accounting firm. Accounting is about numbers. It's rational, orderly, logical.*

*Emotions are irrational, messy, and they don't follow rules of logic. "Emotional intelligence" is a buzzword. One of those feel-good, flavor-of-the-month initiatives cooked up by marketing and HR—irrelevant to the real work of serving clients and growing the firm.*

Does that about sum up the mentality of your firm's partners? If so, they're behind the times—and you might be just the one who can help open their eyes to the ROI of emotional intelligence.

"We have found that an individual's emotional quotient is often more important to their success as a leader than their intelligence quotient," says John Richter, chief strategy officer of Top 10 firm CliftonLarsonAllen (more than 100 locations, 600 principals and 4,500 professionals). "Leaders may or may not be the best technicians, but they are the ones who can motivate and engage the people around them."

Emotional intelligence (EI) is "one of the single biggest predictors of success in all types of jobs," says Dennis L. Faurote, founder of human capital consulting and training firm The Faurote Group.

## The ROI of EI

Those who dismiss emotional intelligence as "fluff" or "soft skills" most likely are not aware of how it can impact organizational performance—up to and including revenue growth.

A 2013 study by the Human Capital Institute and Multi-Health Systems found that organizations that spend more than 30% of their training budgets on leadership development are significantly more likely than other organizations to report annual revenue increases of 5% or more. And while only about 37% of participants said they incorporated EI into their leadership development programs, 60% of managers whose organizations use EI assessments rate them as "effective" or "highly effective."

In fact, the study demonstrated a correlation between use of EI assessments and revenue growth. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of organizations that performed EI assessments reported positive revenue growth, compared with 56% of organizations that didn't assess EI.

Richter also sees a strong link between EI and financial performance. "People who understand themselves, their impact on others and who are able to 'peel back the covers' to uncover people's pain and earn their trust are the ones who drive the greatest amount of business for us."

For a firm like CLA, which focuses on small and midsize private businesses and not-for-profits rather than Fortune 500 companies, success depends on learning to connect and engage with people. "Our message to our people is that there is always an owner behind the company. It's always about the interests and needs of that person," Richter explains.

The skills of emotional intelligence are foundational for client service and business development, as well as people development.

## Emotional Intelligence Distinguishes Successful CPAs

**A September 2016 Harvard Business Review article makes the case for why accountants and other professionals need emotional intelligence. (See <https://hbr.org/2016/09/why-young-bankers-lawyers-and-consultants-need-emotional-intelligence>) In "Why Young Bankers, Lawyers, and Consultants Need Emotional Intelligence," investment banker James Runde writes:**

*"Early in your career—whether it's in banking, law, consulting or accounting—you will discover that all your colleagues are as smart and hard working as you. You'll learn that the key to being successful must be something else. Over my 40-year banking career, I've learned that the critical distinguishing factor for advancing in the professional services is emotional intelligence."*

“We don’t ever want to ‘sell’ anything,” Richter says. “All we ever want to do is understand who they are, what their issues are, and present options and opportunities to help them solve the problems they are facing. And you can’t do that unless you can relate to them, unless you can delay judgment, unless you can help them not only reveal but also get in touch with their pain.”

Marketing and business development professionals can make a profound impact on their firms and the professionals within them by helping to foster the emotional intelligence they need to connect with and engage clients and potential clients. But doing so first requires understanding what it means.

## What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Science journalist Daniel Goleman popularized the term “emotional intelligence” (EI) in 1995 with the book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*.

EI has been defined differently over the years. Faurote, who frequently uses the Emotional Quotient Inventory 2.0 (EQ-i2.0) from Multi-Health Systems Inc. (MHS) to assess his clients’ emotional skills, uses Multi-Health Systems’ definition of emotional intelligence:

“The set of emotional and social skills that impact the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way.”

The components of this definition correspond to 15 competencies – or sub-scales – that range from flexibility and stress tolerance to problem solving and impulse control.

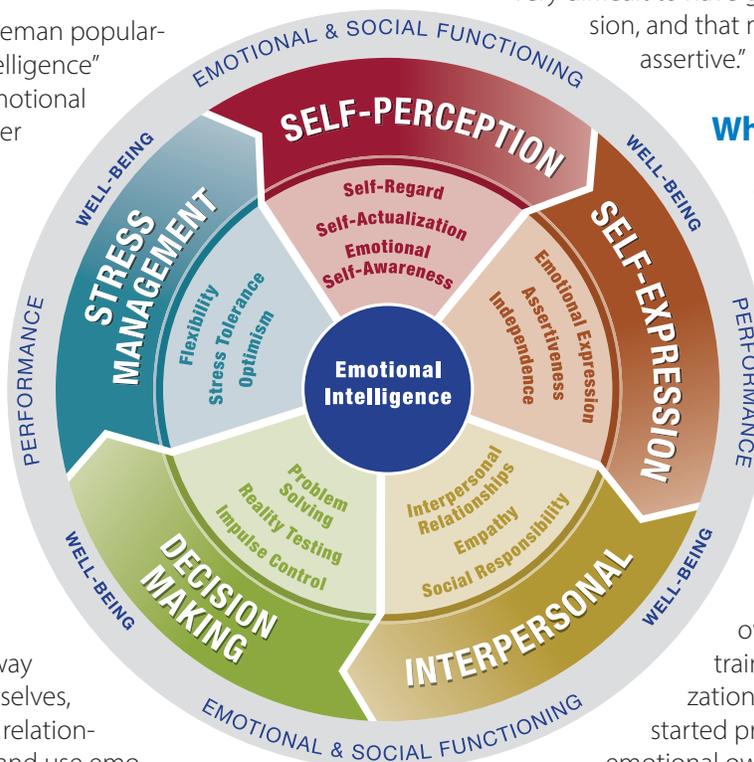
One of those competencies, emotional self-awareness, has to do with understanding one’s own emotions and what is causing them. “Probably less than 30% of people can accurately do that,” Faurote says. “Most of us are controlled by emotions, and we don’t even know we are feeling them or what is causing them.”

If you’ve ever seen someone “fly off the handle” with a colleague, a subordinate or even a client, then there’s a good

chance that the seemingly trivial (at least to you) trigger actually hit a nerve that person didn’t even know about—or at least didn’t know how to articulate.

“If we can help our people become more self-aware of their moods, their emotions, their drive and their effect on others, then we believe they will be more self-confident, more realistic in their perspective about their ability to serve,” Richter says. “We believe they will be more humble, which is an important place to be. In our business, it’s easy to think you are the smartest person. But that doesn’t work well for that owner. They are pretty smart as well.”

Emotional self-awareness has a direct impact on a person’s assertiveness, Faurote says. “If you can’t or don’t understand what you’re feeling and what’s causing it, then it becomes very difficult to have good emotional expression, and that makes it very difficult to be assertive.”



## Where Do You Start?

So where in a CPA firm does one start to introduce EI concepts? Assuming that it isn’t financially or logistically feasible to roll it out to the entire firm at once, do you start with the partner group? With new hires? With managers and senior managers on a partnership track?

CLA started with the newest owners and then extended EI training throughout the organization. “Around 2005 or 2006, we started promoting a concept called emotional ownership. It was an invitation to our people to act, think and operate like owners in our enterprise,” Richter says. Using Daniel Goleman’s materials, Richter led a workshop with the young principals in which they assessed their own emotional intelligence and discussed how they could help their teams develop EI competencies.

Several years later, the firm engaged Faurote to incorporate EI concepts into entry-level training. More recently, the firm started incorporating intensive EI assessment and training as part of a six-month leadership development program that is grooming partners to become a partner-in-charge of a niche or an office. Faurote first led a two-day session with C-suite executives and then came back three weeks later to lead a session for the entire group of 40 partners, which focused on why EI is so important for them as individuals and for

Image Credit: Copyright 2011 Multi-Health Systems Inc. All rights reserved. Based on the original BarOn EQ-i authored by Reuven Bar-On, copyright 1997.

# Client Experience: A New Frontier in an Accounting Marketer's Career Path

Leisa Gill, *LBMC* and Mitch Reno, *Rehmann*



In recent years, we have witnessed the continuous evolution of marketing, not just in the accounting industry, but also as a profession. The rapid advancement of technology has enhanced opportunities for brand recognition and awareness, yet this is still very much a relationship-driven profession.



The client experience involves both pieces, as it relates to communication and messaging from a firm (its brand promise) and the face-to-face client service and relationship (execution of the brand promise). The new career path of client experience director has emerged in the CPA profession that is perfect for marketers because it pairs traditional areas of marketing focus with client feedback and training to further develop

a culture that is centered on the client experience. Below, we provide a few insights into this emerging career path and how it rewards the professional and the firm.

## What is the role of a client experience director?

**Leisa Gill:** It really depends on the strategic goals of the firm. For LBMC, it is about focusing on client retention and growth as well as consistency of service delivery. A strong brand has promises behind it that support and reinforce the brand, thus attracting companies to it. Without the client voice in the process, it is a one-sided relationship. We are using CX (client experience) to drive a new process for serving clients, engaging with them and gathering feedback from them to continue refining the process. During this first year, we are focusing on key client account planning and client feedback. We are also utilizing technology wherever it makes sense and in a way that doesn't detract from the one-on-one relationship, but rather reinforces and supports it.

**Mitch Reno:** As Leisa has suggested, the role of a director of client experience likely varies from firm to firm at this stage of our industry's evolution and integration of the new role. I spend about 25 percent of my time leading the firm's client-centric growth strategy, which ensures that we take client insights and

identify how they shape strategic goals, operating plans and tactical programming. My role is to deploy the strategy through integrating all elements of the business that impact client loyalty and retention. For us, that includes developing annual operating plans; training and organizational development programming; information technology innovations; client journey mapping; new product development; and client-facing tactical efforts to improve client satisfaction and CX. Specifically, in this new role, I am spending far more time engaged in interviewing clients (current and lost) and analyzing client needs. Like Leisa, I'm also involved in significant amounts of key account planning and working with service teams to build enhanced client service plans.

## Why is CX critical for the accounting firm industry?

**MR:** Years ago, CPAs could compete on providing solid quality and service locally. In recent years, our industry has been focusing on using industry and service line specialization to differentiate. I firmly believe that the next competitive battlefield will be focused on providing a differentiated journey for clients that is uniquely branded. Firms will attract and retain the top clients by being able to demonstrate how they provide uniquely better experiences to clients so that their brand promise matches what they are delivering in the marketplace. Saying you provide "great service" on your website won't be enough anymore. Your firm will have to prove it by deploying a consistent service model/experience that creates higher levels of satisfaction to drive profitable growth and sustainability.

**LG:** Growth is important, but so is client retention and loyalty. Same goes for top talent. For years there has been a focus on niche development and geographic growth. Many firms have grown tremendously through acquisition. Additionally, you hear companies talk about new business percentages, but you rarely hear firms talk about lost clients and why. When you peel back the layers of client communications, you find out that there is little differentiation between one firm and another. Clients expect a CPA firm to be able to do the job they are requesting of them—that is the minimum. It is the experience that keeps them coming back.

## How did you evolve into the role from being chief marketing officers?

**LG:** In the past two years, we embarked upon a rebranding. The rebranding was an amazing journey to looking at things differently. We spend so much time positioning and branding our firms, that to truly understand the firm from a client's eyes brings the brand full circle. So, in that process, our managing partner and I kept coming back to asking what was most important about the LBMC brand. Client feedback was revealing, and we wanted to keep the momentum of being a "better firm" but also to recognize that there is always an opportunity for improvement. After all, if you are growing, so is your team, which means that opportunity for improving process, engagement and interaction with clients exists. After 22 years, I hung up my marketing hat and put on the CX hat. No path before me, no safety net to catch me and no history of experience in this role, yet full of excitement for what the future could be with this new focus.

**MR:** For me, this seemed like a natural career transition. Rehmann's client-centric strategy has been what I've been most passionate about. For me, it's a natural extension of marketing, because it is all about driving the brand promise from the inside out. By focusing on systems and processes that help the firm live up to its brand promise of providing a "better experience," I am helping service teams implement our service model effectively, thus bringing the brand to life. This is really an adventure and I've been amazed what I've already learned about how the world of CX can impact our industry.

## What skills sets do you need to be successful as director of client experience?

**MR:** Natural inquisitiveness, listening and collaboration skills are key for success in this role. In most firms, people in these roles are involved in deploying client surveys and other research. You'll also find that strong interpersonal and interviewing skills are important. Whether you are interacting with clients or service teams, communication and facilitation skills are important when balancing sensitive situations with complex relationship dependencies. Working with long-time, successful partners and coaching their teams on taking things to the next level requires a good blend of empathy and common sense.

**LG:** Mitch has a great list and I agree with his answer entirely. I would also add passion for the clients and a curiosity about their situations. CX must be a team player and respectful of all involved in the process. While our managing partner has called it the most strategic position in our firm, it is not a boastful role, but a unifying role that demands someone who communicates appropriately, possesses excellent listening skills and has the desire to be a problem solver. Lastly, a CX leader must be a learner and a teacher.

Clients expect a CPA firm to be able to do the job they are requesting of them—that is the minimum. It is the experience that keeps them coming back.

**MR:** Leisa is right; this is really a role that can be the "glue" between different departments and silos within a firm as they work together for the client. It's all about keeping the client as the central focus in all we do.

## What level of maturity should a firm achieve before it can benefit from a client engagement leader?

**MR:** I believe all firms need to be focused on CX programming going forward. The tipping point for determining when to create a full-time role will likely vary by organization. It's fair to say that firms that have a culture keenly focused on client and associate satisfaction will create the role faster than others. Until they hit the tipping point, this is a key place for marketing directors to make an impact and collaborate with their managing partner to drive the right strategy and operating tactics.

**LG:** Just as every firm's strategy is different, I also believe there are levels of CX that are appropriate. It is a much broader focus than just keeping a client happy—it is a way of utilizing the client voice to drive change, engagement and training to build a better and stronger firm and a richer client experience.

*Both Leisa and Mitch welcome inquiries from marketers, BDEs and CPAs eager to learn more.*

## About the Authors

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# Marketers: Be Aware and Unique

Eileen Monesson, *PRCounts, LLC*



According to a survey of 7500 accounting clients conducted by CPA consultants L. Harris Partners, two out of five respondents do NOT find their accounting firm to be unique. After all of the time and effort invested in marketing, most firms are still not clearly presenting their unique selling proposition to the world.

One can go to almost any accounting firm website and read similar positioning statements, such as:

- ✓ We provide excellent service.
- ✓ We will respond when you call.
- ✓ We take the time to explain what the numbers mean.
- ✓ We have been in business since...

None of these positioning statements express the unique value you can bring to a relationship. When you think about it, CPAs should be service-orientated, responsive and informative. That is their job. And, who really cares that you make all of these claims? Inavero, a market leader in client satisfaction surveys, found in one of its research studies that only two percent of clients (300 participated in its survey) trust the marketing messages they received from their accounting firm.

Inavero also found that only 22 percent of the survey participants said that their accounting firm frequently exceeded their expectations—approximately one in five clients. That means that accountants fail to deliver service beyond what is expected to four out of five clients. Even so, firms use service as a key point of differentiation. It's therefore not surprising that few clients believe the messages that marketers develop. There is a gap that obviously needs to be filled.

Inavero presents viable suggestions to close the gap in its whitepaper entitled, *The Loyalty Rules for Accounting: 4 Ways to Make Client Service Your Most Powerful Differentiator* (<https://www.inavero.com/wp-content/uploads/Loyalty-Rules-for-Accounting-Guide.pdf>). The company recommends that you differentiate your firm by:

1. Empowering your team
2. Being responsive, proactive and on time

3. Making client education a priority
4. Helping clients who love you tell your story

## Clients:

1. If you were to give (firm name) employees an award, what would it be for?
2. Since you have been a client of the firm, is there anything (firm name) did or does that was more than you expected?
3. What are the three main reasons why you like doing business with (firm name)?
4. If you were to describe (firm name) to a friend or colleague, what would you say?
5. If you could change one thing about (firm name) what would it be and what is the main reason that one thing needs to be changed?

## Employees:

1. If our employees were to receive an award from clients, what would it be for?
2. What makes clients rave about (firm name)? If there isn't anything, why not?
3. How is (firm name) unique when compared to other accounting firms?
4. What do other firms do that (firm name) would never do?
5. What does (firm name) do that other accounting firms would never do?

The data collected, along with Brand Integrity's process to actually achieve brand integrity, can help your employees bring your firm's brand to life.

Another approach would be to develop your unique position statement from the point of view of your clients. They have a problem that needs to be resolved. You have a solution to that problem. Identify the problem(s) faced by your typical

client and position your firm as the solution provider. Use this template to guide you through the process:

Your Firm	Your Purpose (example: help clients to increase revenue and profits)
What your clients want	Problem, pain, "hot button"
What you do now	Focus on the reality
What you could do	Extraordinary solution
How your clients will benefit	Convincing benefits

Implementing one or more of these strategies can help to uniquely position your firm. Look inside and determine what you do that no one else can do. That is your point of differentiation, which when successfully communicated, will bring your brand to life and uniquely position your firm.

### About the Author

*Eileen Monesson, CPC, principal with PRCounts, is a strategic marketer and coach who creates market dominating brands. She can be contacted at 848-459-3130 or emonesson@PRCounts.com.*

#### *Fostering Emotional Intelligence from page 9*

the firm. At the end of the program, Faurote led a final session that ties EI into all the other components of leadership development—from marketing and sales to leading projects to strategic thinking.

### Use Partners' Language to Facilitate Self-Discovery

CLA did encounter some pushback to EI training along the way. Richter's advice? "You do it in their language, at their pace."

Here's how Faurote goes about getting partner buy-in: When he is able to get partners in a room together, he first introduces the 15 competencies of EI. Then he asks the participants to tell him about the best boss they've ever known. He almost never hears anything about how those leaders were the smartest, most technical people. Instead, participants throw out words and phrases like "good listener," "empathetic" and "teamwork"—all of which connect back to EI competencies.

The beauty of this approach is that it's a self-discovery, Faurote says. "If you say to them, 'This is why it's important and you need to do it,' of course they don't do it. But it is getting in front of them and facilitating in a way so that they discover for themselves that it makes perfect sense."

And what about those naysayers who refuse to buy in? "You don't keep banging on those doors," Richter advises. "You move on."

### How Growth Leaders Can Foster EI

The accounting industry of today is in flux, and the firms that will grow and thrive need to learn new skills sets and paradigms.

"In a business that is transforming, you have to be open to change," Richter says. "We need highly motivated individuals. We need people who are ready and capable to interact in this very diverse, inclusive, unique world in which we operate today. We just think we are a stronger company by teaching these skills."

The most important point to remember when fostering EI skills, Richter says, is that firms shouldn't treat emotional intelligence assessment and training like an event. "You build it into the language of the firm and you reinforce the behavior," he says. "Everything you do, from performance coaching to income awards to client assignments, is based upon that language and that framework."

### About the Author

*As owner of Creative Sparks, Laura Sparks partners with accountants and other professionals to articulate their ideas and insights through thought leadership content. Contact her at [laura@accountingwriter.com](mailto:laura@accountingwriter.com) or (678) 973-0687.*

# Pricing an Engagement

## Marketing, Business Development and Partners: Synergy = Success

Marsha Leest, *Marsha Leest Consulting*



The synergy between partners, marketing and BD can be powerful.

It is playing out in some unexpected ways as the roles of marketing and business development (BD) continue to evolve, particularly in firms that think in terms of long-range planning. In many of these firms, marketing and BD are included in

the planning of strategic initiatives, including pricing. While the actual pricing of an engagement generally remains at the partner/consultant level, the firm's marketing and BD professionals provide valuable insights that help guide the firm's pricing strategy in specific industries and for specific services.

"Business development has a handle on what is going on in the marketplace. They are grounded in that reality because that is where they work every day. They understand what needs to go into the proposal and what the market will bear," explains Danielle Eisenach, national director of business development education at BDO. "Marketing has a different role. Their role is to individualize the client in the proposal and highlight the client's pain points. The goal is making the client understand that your firm is the most knowledgeable and best positioned firm to meet the client's needs."

### Asking the Right Questions Is Critical

Lucas Maatman and Jason Jobgen, business development executives in BKD's cost segregation practice, are very familiar with the real estate market in their area. They understand that cost segregation studies are one-time projects that have to be priced in a particular way. They make sure all relevant factors are taken into account.

"Really understanding the scope of the project is critical," Lucas says. "You have to ask all the right questions so you can correctly price the engagement. You can throw off the entire bid by failing to include an important fact."

At the same time, they have to keep in mind that they are responsible for managing their client relationships. Consequently, they need to remain alert to other potential work, so listening well is a big part of the process. This is especially true because a cost segregation study can be the beginning of a longer term relationship.

"We think about whether the client or potential client is in need of other services the firm offers," adds Jobgen. "We may get into a company because they need a cost segregation study, but a good business developer understands the industry and will be taking note of clues that the client is open to hearing about other services."

And don't forget that the client is the party that ultimately determines whether they will engage your firm or a competitor. Sometimes the decision comes down to price. Especially in this market, where services like audits, for example, are often viewed as commodities, you may find yourself in a situation where the client's primary consideration is price. For most firms, that is neither the work they want nor the criteria on which they wish to compete. That's why it's important to talk about price early in the sales process.

When marketing has the latitude to research the right information and data—which may include such points as how your top competitors differentiate themselves, benchmarking studies in a target industry and the perceived value of a particular service—they can develop a marketing strategy that positions your firm as the go-to firm in the particular market so that lowest price is not the reason your firm is chosen.

### Pricing Is More Than Estimated Billable Hours

Billable rate, budgeted hours and realization don't necessarily flow in a straight line. Nicola Fleming, marketing manager with Perkins & Co., and Dave Sullivan, director of business development at the firm, agree that both marketing and BD have important roles in pricing because they can factor market conditions into the equation. But, they warn, marketing and BD won't be included in the pricing discussion unless the firm's culture encourages the kind of collaboration that allows people at different levels to work cooperatively.

"You don't know what you don't know," says Fleming. "Partners understand the technical and budgeting aspects of pricing a project, but marketing and business development are responsible for putting a personal touch on any proposal. They understand the value clients put on services like tax planning and R&D studies."

There's more to pricing than a budgeting formula. The gap is filled by marketing, which crafts a proposal that considers

intangible value, and business development, which is in the field every day speaking with the people who will be buying the firm's services.

"Marketing's role is seeing the big picture. They need to position the firm in a way that convinces clients and potential clients they are paying to get the answers to their questions and the outcomes they deserve," says Sullivan.

The Visionary Group's Bob Lewis agrees. He points out, "Fees are the last reason people switch firms. They want quality. Once they are sure that's what they're getting, pricing will take care of itself. Clients are paying for perceived value."

## One Size Doesn't Fit All

You'll also want to look for pricing trends, and this data rests outside of one partner's individual experiences. Perhaps a certain buyer group wants to pick their own level of service. Or they want a fixed fee. Or they don't understand what they are getting for the price paid. This is valuable information that will let you develop or tweak your approach.

"One trend that is gaining in popularity is the concept of productizing services," reports Katie Tolin, president of CPA Growth Guides. "Basically, this is making your intangible service look like a tangible product. You put it in a box and label it so people know what they are getting. With that come set prices. Maybe you develop gold, silver and bronze packages where the buyer gets a little more with each level and the pricing increases accordingly. Buyers like having this choice and are beginning to ask their accountants for it. A firm's marketing and sales team can help research and test packages in the market to make sure they resonate with buyers and are priced right."

Innovative new service offerings like this are a great place for firm leaders to involve marketing and BD. But, as always, firm culture has to acknowledge and allow for people in different roles to cross over the perceived lines in their duties. Good ideas can come from anywhere in the firm. Sometimes it is difficult to get partners on board with this kind of thinking, but once they see the value of including non-partners in the process, they buy in.

"Of course," says Tolin, "it is important to test the viability of any new service with early adopters. This is a process marketing should own, and business developers are perfectly positioned to get the feedback needed. You don't want to guess how this type of pricing structure will be received. You want to make sure each pricing level includes something people are willing to buy at a price they think is fair and at which you can make a profit."



## Understanding What the Client Is Willing to Pay Is Key to a Solid Pricing Strategy

The key to any solid pricing strategy is understanding what the buyer is willing to pay. The best way to do that is to ask. In many firms BD professionals are the best people to do the asking because they are in a position to understand the market in a way partners often do not. The answers they get can provide important market information.

If, for instance, there is pushback on price because the firm seems to be the lowest priced firm in town, the solution may lie in a revamped marketing strategy. If the problem is price sensitivity because the client is cash-strapped, that may indicate that the firm is going after the wrong clients and needs to redefine its target market. Marketing can help improve both situations.

When firm leaders work in conjunction with marketing and BD to develop firm strategies, such as pricing, the result will be more successful than any one of them working alone. There are many smart marketers and BD professionals in firms today who understand how to position a firm and its service offerings with compelling pricing. Firms should take advantage of their expertise.

## About the Author

*Marsha Leest is the president of Marsha Leest Consulting where she uses her experience as a published author, editor and in-house marketing director to help firms with ghostwriting and implementing strategic communication strategies that fuel growth. A member of the Accounting Marketing Hall of Fame, Marsha can be reached at 845.369.3224 or mleest@leestconsulting.com.*

# Budgeting for Success

## Tips for creating and presenting your budget

Rebecca Robson, *Sensiba San Filippo*



If your firm is blessed with an ever-flowing supply of cash, then maybe you don't need to worry too much about your marketing budget. For the other 90%, the challenge essentially boils down to a continuous tug of war between idealism and reality. When it comes to the approval process, it takes more than a quick spiel and a handout to win over your partners and finance team. A comprehensive strategy and thorough detailing of costs and returns is vital to gaining support and securing funds for you and your team.

According to the general rule of thumb, a marketing budget will comprise 3-5% of the company's overall revenue. But the fact of the matter is that many of us are functioning off a lot less than that, and for a good number, the allotment amounts to much less. So how do you confront your partners when you need more money for that banner campaign, or you really need to hire a full-time coordinator? Here are some tips that may help you approach your budget requests with a little more confidence and strategy.

### Transparency

Strive to maintain a clean, no-questions-asked kind of budget. A partner should be able to look at your budget at any moment and know exactly where money is allocated, and exactly how much is being allocated. Avoid ominous phrasing or shifty categories that could cause uncertainty. For new managers, or for those who have inherited an untrusted budget, this transparency becomes your jetpack to gaining trust and rapport. Creating a clear map of the department's spending is the first step to helping others see value and measurable results.

### Know the audience

Accountants like facts, numbers and graphical representation of dollars. They like to know what value goes in, and precisely what value comes out. This means you should track your data over the year and calculate return on investments (ROIs) wherever possible. If you know that your new website costs "x" and your online inquiries went up by "y" percent and resulted in "z" number of client wins, then that's a victory worth presenting. However, keep the fluff to a minimum, stick to facts and never gloat.

### Set your boundaries

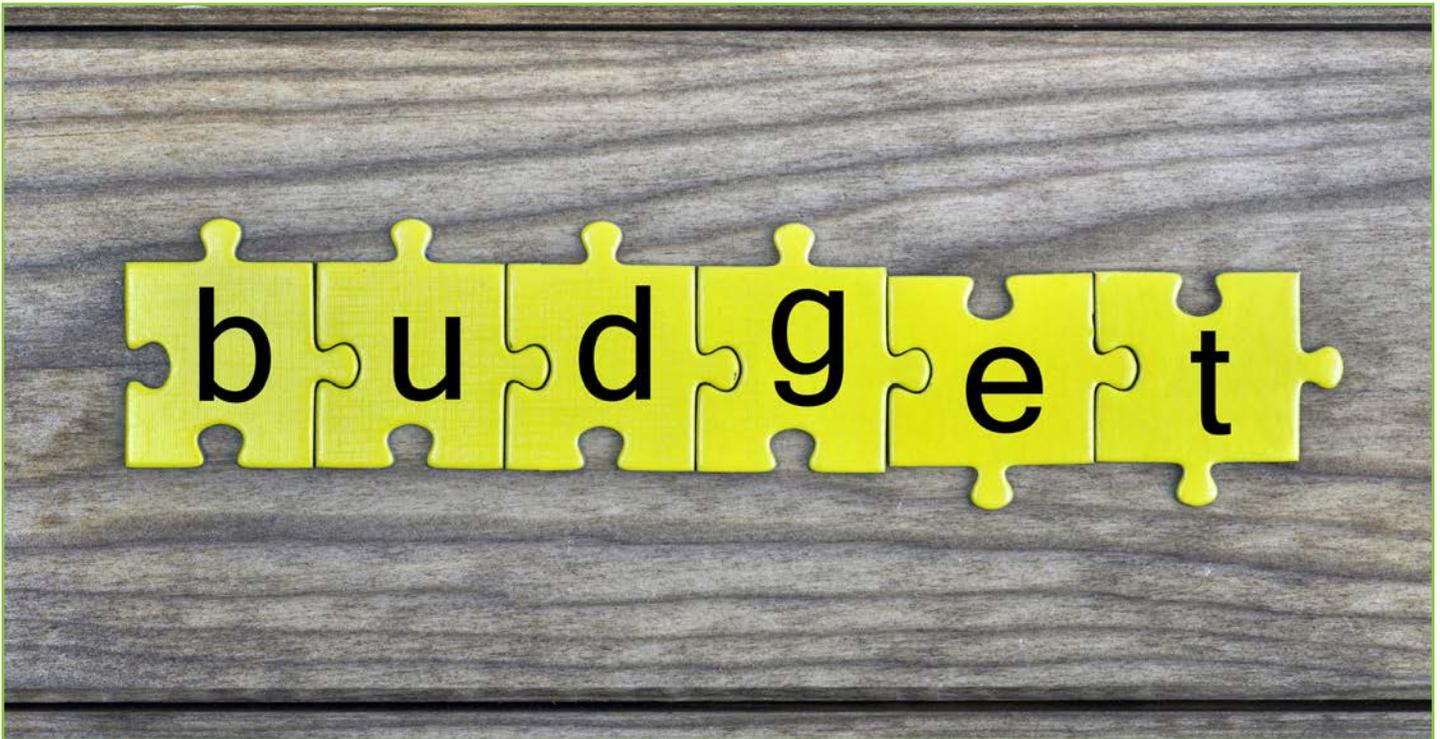
We've all heard "I didn't know what to call it, so I put it under the marketing budget." Marketing has a tendency to become a catchall pit of miscellaneous expenses that eventually eat into your cash vault. It also becomes the source (often unknowingly) responsible for covering partner sponsorships, golf outings and other unilaterally allocated costs. Surprises like these can be detrimental to the budget if you a) have no control over the event, and b) didn't even know it happened. To counter this issue, talk to your controller about setting up a second GL code for partner sponsorships and networking events. Anything that you are not directly in control of or don't sign off on should be put into a separate silo of expenses.

### Spread the love

It's certainly no secret that particular niches generate more value or require more attention than others. Not all niches are created equal; however, when it comes to the marketing budget, make sure that every niche is given some love. Make sure that your budget explicitly addresses each niche and clearly shows where the money is going. Aside from the niches, also demonstrate that you're utilizing a strategic range of marketing tactics: publications, event sponsorship, speaking engagements, etc. Distribute your funds across a spectrum of outlets so you know what's working and what's not. It will also help to show that you are not putting all your eggs in one basket.

### Trim the fat

Don't be scared to re-evaluate vendors or contracts that may be losing their spunk. It's often hard to sever ties with the folks that have treated you well over the years, but the moment you start to question their quality or worth, it's time to start shopping elsewhere. If they're not going above and beyond for your business, you are guaranteed to find someone who will. Also, inventory your current publication contracts to determine where you're getting the most bang for your buck. Maybe the content for a certain publication is no longer bringing in value, or you're noticing that digital advertising is working much better than print in certain regions. Stay on top of the numbers and always ask yourself what options will bring the greatest ROI.



## Be different

Just because your competition is doing it doesn't mean you should. Don't present what is working for your competitors—present what works for your clients and your audience. Certain strategies or marketing outlets might work wonders for other firms, but in the end, your firm is unique and you need to tailor your strategy to target your specific client pool. Try advertising in places where your competition is quiet or unrepresented—you may uncover a goldmine of new prospects.

## Match your budget to your strategy

Your strategy should mirror the goal and strategy of the firm, and your budget should aim to support that strategy. If something in your budget doesn't support the overall goals or message of the firm, then it shouldn't be in your budget. Be confident in saying no to events or sponsorships that are not directly in line with this ideal.

## Budget for risks

Nowadays, you have to be innovative if you want to grow. Innovation usually involves taking some risks, so be sure to budget in funds for dabbling in new territory. Be pathfinders and target areas that are new or untraveled. In order to make wise decisions, you need to take some risks and figure out what works for your firm. The answers will change over time, so ongoing experimentation is a necessary element of your overall marketing strategy.

## Practice

Presenting your budget is just like any other presentation—you need to be prepared. Know your speaking points, be able to point to supporting statistics, anticipate questions and have responses prepared for possible areas of concern. Know what kinds of campaigns do and don't work for your budget. If you are unsure about your numbers, be sure before going into your presentation. Remember, these are people who live and breathe numbers. Think like an auditor and ensure all your ducks are in a row before walking into the meeting. It's also a great idea to practice with someone familiar with the financial industry—like a fellow AAM member!

Budgeting, like most things in business, is a balancing act. It's a matter of finding the perfect blend of facts and projections, innovation and tradition, risk and comfort. Prepare for the worst, strive for the best and be confident in whatever comes your way.

## About the Author

*Rebecca is the Marketing Coordinator at Sensiba San Filippo LLP—a tax, audit and business consulting firm based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She specializes in content creation and strategy for the firm and various regional and international non-profits. Contact Rebecca at [robson@ssfllp.com](mailto:robson@ssfllp.com).*

# The Future of Accounting Marketing: AAM Rookies of the Year Look Ahead

Katie Butler, **Weinstein Spira** and Ian McManis, **Barnes Dennig**



While they share AAM's 2016 title of Rookie of the Year, Katie Butler and Ian McManis have gained different experiences and unique perspectives on the accounting marketing profession. Butler is a one-person marketing department working with more than 65 professionals at Houston-based Weinstein Spira. McManis works within a marketing department of four people serving the 150 professionals of Cincinnati-based Barnes Dennig. Growth Strategies invited Katie and Ian to discuss their perspectives on the future of the accounting marketing profession including evolving marketing roles, client service culture, the rise of review sites, mission-critical marketing tools and how marketers should best invest in themselves.



## Evolving Marketing Roles

**Katie:** We hear so much lately about firms' demand for hybrid roles, asking traditional marketers to stretch more into business development activities. What other changes to the marketing department's roles and responsibilities do you predict for the next few years?

**Ian:** I see the demand rising for marketers to expand our information technology skillsets. To research, implement and leverage tools like marketing automation systems and CRM, you need to acquire a comfort level of technical knowledge.

**Katie:** Agreed. Even if you're outsourcing these to consultants, you must still speak the language and have the ability to translate it to your leadership team, your internal IT staff and other vendors. I've also found it to be extremely beneficial to become knowledgeable about our data storage and server security issues as they relate to the firm's website and marketing content.

**Ian:** Another technology-related change to the marketer's roles relates to data analysis. Now that we have access to a world of metrics and tracking information, firms will increase

pressure on the marketing department to translate those numbers into actions. This is exciting because we can accurately demonstrate successful initiatives, and the firm's leadership can direct more resources and budget to what works.

## Client Service Culture

**Ian:** Who will be setting the tone for client service culture: accountants or marketers?

**Katie:** I see it as a delicate balance. Marketing professionals are in an excellent position to provide firm-wide guidance and coaching designed to add consistency to the client experience, but we're not on the front lines. There are no cookie-cutter solutions to guarantee outstanding service, and the accountants must deliver their own customized style.

**Ian:** I see that, too. If the marketing department can equip the accounting professionals with tools and training that support firm culture and brand standards, we give the accountants some latitude to execute it in their personal style—and we can then focus our time and energy in other areas. That makes everyone more efficient.

## The Rise of Review Sites

**Katie:** Have you seen an impact on accounting firms from the rise of review sites like Angie's List, Yelp and Facebook? I believe that direct word-of-mouth referrals continue to have the most powerful influence. Even among the millennial business owners and executives we serve, they don't seem to be inclined to post online reviews about their professional service providers.

**Ian:** Not yet. I do think review sites will ultimately become an avenue where we can hear more about what business owners and executives want or don't want. The opinions and reviews within an executive's network will become more and more visible to them online. But right now, the review sites are not a major influence on our corporate services.

**Katie:** Agreed. These sites are impacting web traffic right now, though. I watch metrics and see a good amount of phone calls and site visits from our Yelp and Google Pages listings. For SEO reasons alone, it is absolutely worthwhile to claim your firm's listings and keep them current.

## Online Presence

**Katie:** From my perspective, I believe an absolute must-have for any firm is a branded, easily-navigated website. This is often your first and best shot at communicating what your firm does and who you serve. What else do you think is crucial for a firm's online presence?

**Ian:** A marketing automation system. This is critical to tracking success of activities. The days of strategy and budget decisions based on gut instincts and subjective results are drawing to a close. More and more, partners will expect hard data that points to results in order to approve marketing budget requests. Marketing automation can help you track and identify top prospects, bring new contacts into your database and more efficiently leverage your marketing time and resources.

## Printed Collaterals

**Ian:** I don't see the need for printed collaterals diminishing much. I think that our audience is still very interested in seeing great printed materials from our firms, just as much as the accountants want to use them. The printed items must integrate well with the digital elements, particularly when it comes to making a call to action.

**Katie:** I strongly agree with this. The leave-behind package is one more touch that communicates your brand. As it engages the human senses, the weight of paper and gloss of the printing speaks to quality. Receiving an interesting, personalized package in the mail is so rare anymore; the printed elements are excellent opportunities to stand out from the crowd.

## Final Thoughts

**Ian:** Looking to the future, I believe that the accounting marketer's best investment would be to expand their technical knowledge of digital tools and data analytics. Beyond the technical aspects, what other critical skills do you see on the horizon for our field?

**Katie:** I think taking the position of reverse mentoring is also important. Accounting marketers should assume the role of teacher and coach within their firms. A mindset of encouragement and creative inspiration ultimately leads to a seat at the leadership table.

## About the Authors

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**Pictured left to right:** Lexi McWiggin, Postlethwaite & Netterville, Katie Butler, Weinstein Spira, and Veronica Malloy, A-LIGN.



**Pictured left to right:** Lexi McWiggin, Postlethwaite & Netterville, an McManis, Barnes Dennig, and Veronica Malloy, A-LIGN.

# DIY Brainstorming

## How to Generate Big Ideas Anytime, Anywhere, by Yourself

Chic Thompson, **What a Great Idea!**



Think back to the last time you were stuck and needed to brainstorm solutions to a challenge. Were you sitting in a conference room with your colleagues eager to engage?

Probably not. You were most likely staring at your computer, alone, with your arms crossed and teeth clenched. That's not the easiest context in which to get the creative juices flowing, but unfortunately, it's probably the way you have to most of the time.

To help you out, I have compiled some creative thinking strategies that will help you conduct your own one-person brainstorming session. I've also added some divergent thinking techniques to overcome your lack of diverse participants.

### The Question is the Answer

*"The answer to any problem preexists. We need to ask the right question to reveal the answer."*

—Dr. Jonas Salk, inventor of polio vaccine

Bingo! We don't find, create or invent creative solutions—we reveal them by asking questions. Thus, the way to solve difficult problems is to ask more questions.

The average five-year-old asks 65 questions per day, most of them starting with "why." The average 44-year-old manager only asks six questions per day; most of them starting with "when," "where" or "how much." The number of questions we ask per day doesn't increase until retirement.



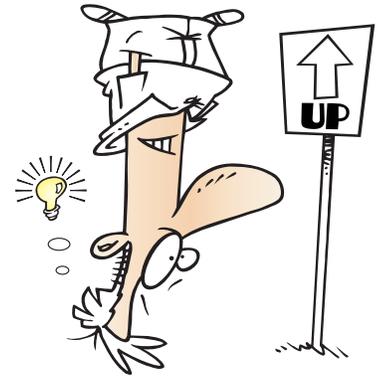
Why retirement? Because that's when we start asking, "Where are my keys?" and "Why did I walk into this room?"

Let's face it—in these complex times, our children's iterations of "why" can lead us much more quickly to the root cause of life's challenges than "when," "where" and "how much."

### Step 1: Define Your Challenge

*"If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes defining the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."*

— Dr. Albert Einstein



An effective definition of your challenge addresses only one problem at a time and does not assign a cause or blame for the problem in the definition. Your definition should identify the pain point you are trying to resolve.

Your definition should not imply a solution. Definitions are about the **What** and the **Why** and not the **How**. Adding an implied solution in your definition can cause your thinking to converge too soon and you might miss some divergent inspirations.

To determine the **What**, start with the end in mind. Ask yourself, what is the result that I want to see, feel and hear when my challenge is solved? Be specific with your vision.

To determine the **Why**, find the urgency to solve your challenge. Ask yourself, why do I want to achieve this result? Be passionate with your vision. Describe why you need to overcome the challenge's pain points.

Additional insights for your definition will come by asking what would happen if you do not find a solution to your challenge.

Your definition can be any length from couple sentences to a few paragraphs. It should be no longer than one page. Then give your definition a 4-8 word "action-driven" title – one that is long enough to be specific and short enough to force clarity.

### Step 2. Take Five: Five Solutions in Five Minutes

Now it's time to think about the **How**. Ask, how am I going to achieve this result? Be bold with your solutions. Take five

minutes and brainstorm until you have five possible solutions.

This rapid-fire brainstorm is a great warm up for your brain and it loosens you up for looking for more possible solutions.

### Step 3. Reframe Your Challenge to Break Old Thought Patterns

Ask, what do I need to be more open-minded about to see new possibilities? What are the negative “killer phrases” that can stifle my creativity and my ideas? Here are some examples:

1. “It’s not in the budget.”
2. “No one has ever done it that way!”
3. “If it ain’t broke...don’t fix it!”

Overcoming these killer phrases will turn the creative tension into a jolt of energy to sustain your perseverance.

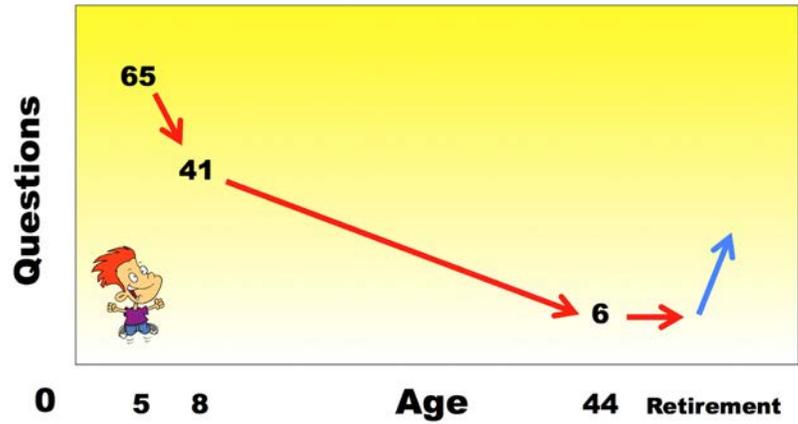
1. “Let’s do a prototype that won’t cost much money.”
2. “Then I’ll have a competitive advantage.”
3. “I’ve got to break it to remove the “pain point.”

Ask, what is unique about your challenge that you have not seen in another situation? Identifying the unique features of your challenge can help you see the root cause of the problem and the seed of the solution that you need to grow.

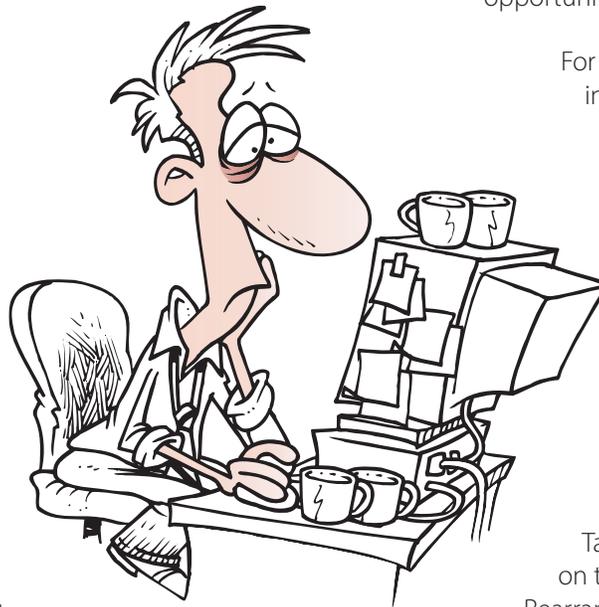
Ask, what is similar to your challenge? What analogy can give you insight and strategies to benchmark? How would another industry respond to your challenge? How would Apple, Zappos, Starbucks, NASCAR or another country solve your challenge?

### Step 4. See Your Blind Spots by Visualizing the Opposite

Be crazy. Brainstorm solutions you would never suggest as possibilities. Ask, what would I never do? Then ask, what if I actually chose this “never” solution? What’s right about the crazy “never” solution?



Finally, ask, what’s the exact opposite of the way others are solving your challenge today? Then ask, what if you actually pursued this opposite solution? Could there be a breakthrough idea here? If so, flip an opposite into an opportunity.



For me, the magic of opposite thinking is that, at first, an opposite idea might sound absurd, contradictory or illogical. Yet upon review, the idea can turn out to be brilliant, true and logical. It can open up possibilities, break through mental blocks and pull the rug out from under false assumptions.

### Step 5. Evaluate Your Solutions

Take your solutions and put them on the wall or lay them out on a table. Rearrange them, combine them and add to them. Be careful not to group ideas that, when combined, hide the unique value of the individual solutions.

Create a bulls-eye diagram with “Must Do” at the center, “Ought to Do” on the next ring and “Nice to Do” as the outer ring. Then sort your solutions into the three rings.

### Step 6. Renovate While You Innovate

As you are creating solutions to implement, it is vital that you identify unsuccessful or inhibiting resources and policies that should be abandoned in order to allow your ideas to be successful. Two questions to ask are:

1. What should I **start** doing to allow my ideas to be successful?

2. What should I **stop** doing to allow my ideas to be successful?

The energy released by abandoning unsuccessful resources and policies will give you the time to implement your solutions.

## Step 7. Present Your Ideas with Passion

Many people only think of one way to share their solution: a PowerPoint presentation with too many slides, too many words and unreadable charts. Create at least two different presentations for your favorite solution and see what you can learn from the different approaches.

Suggested presentation formats:

1. The one-minute elevator speech.
2. The fifteen-minute stadium speech to your 10,000 cheering fans.
3. The Tweet strategy: Sell your idea in 140 characters.
4. The napkin pitch: It's just what is on the napkin and the story you tell.
5. The billboard strategy: Sell the idea on a highway billboard. What's your headline? What's your visual? What's your call to action? Remember, people are driving 65 mph past your sign so it needs to grab their attention and quickly communicate the advantages your solution offers.

## Step 8. Smile

When you feel stuck...smile. When you are selling your solution...smile. When your ideas change the world...smile.

## Step 9: Don't Kill Your Idea!

Since you know by now how much I like to think in opposites, you won't be surprised to hear my suggestions to avoid accidentally killing off your idea before it has a chance to work. The following behaviors are likely to deal a deathblow to your solution, no matter how well thought out. Here's my list of the top ten ways to kill your idea:

1. Expect to receive all the credit.
2. Never look for a second right answer.
3. Drag your feet; lack a sense of commitment.
4. Run it through a committee.
5. Wait for market surveys and full market analysis.

6. Hold lengthy meetings to explore its merit.
7. Boost cost estimates, just to be safe.
8. Set unrealistic deadlines.
9. Don't get views from other stakeholders.
10. Make sure it's the only idea you ever have.

## Step 10. Homework Assignment

*"We entered school as question marks, we graduated as periods."*

— Dr. Neil Postman, educator

Hopefully, you are seeing the power of asking great questions, and now it's time to give you some homework to increase your question-asking quotient. Tonight, instead of asking your kids, "What did you learn today in school?" ask them, "What questions did you ask today?" Then encourage your kids to practice this level of creative inquiry by saying, "What questions did you ask today at work, Dad?" Enjoy the new family conversation.



You started school as a question mark asking why. My hope is that you regain that question mark status by remembering to ask questions every day. Consider how your life might change if you retired as a question mark instead of a period. Then you might spend your golden years asking, "What great book should I read today, and why?" instead of "Where are my car keys?"

## About the Author

*Chic Thompson is author of What a Great Idea! and Yes, but... He is a Batten Fellow of Entrepreneurship at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business, Founding Fellow of Open-Grounds at UVA and adjunct faculty at The Brookings Institution. Harvard Business School wrote a case on his speaking career entitled, What a Great Idea! For more information, go to [www.whatagreatidea.com](http://www.whatagreatidea.com).*

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