

The Language of Business

An Interview with Christine M. Fenske,
Managing Partner-New York, Baker Tilly Virchow Krause, LLP

EDITORS' NOTE *Chris Fenske has been with Baker Tilly Virchow Krause, LLP since 2004 and is currently the managing partner of its New York office. She also leads the firm's asset management practice, having specialized in financial institutions since 1984. Fenske was elected to the firm's Board of Partners in 2012 and was a founding member of the firm's women's initiative, GROW. Prior to Baker Tilly, she was a senior manager of the Wisconsin financial institutions marketplace for a national firm. She received her B.B.A. in Accounting from University of Wisconsin – Whitewater.*



Christine M. Fenske

FIRM BRIEF *Baker Tilly Virchow Krause, LLP (bakertilly.com) is a nationally recognized, full-service accounting and advisory firm whose specialized professionals connect with clients and their businesses through refreshing candor and clear industry insight. With approximately 2,700 employees across the United States, Baker Tilly is ranked as one of the 15 largest accounting and advisory firms in the country. Headquartered in Chicago, Baker Tilly is an independent member of Baker Tilly International, a worldwide network of independent accounting and business advisory firms in 147 countries, with 30,000 professionals.*

What are the keys to Baker Tilly's success and what makes the firm special?

The secret sauce comes from two things: the culture that we built creates a positive environment for our people so they want to come to work every day and perform at their best. That dovetails into very high-touch client service. Our leverage model is a little different. We have more partner and manager involvement with clients than other firms that I've experienced. When we have happy people spending more time with our clients, it's a winning combination.

The whole business is about people, be it our employees or clients and, if they're happy, it feeds itself.

Does Baker Tilly's strength stretch across all industries and company sizes?

We focus on industry specialization. This allows us to truly understand our clients' businesses, follow developments in a particular field or sector, and deliver greater value through insights and suggestions. For our

team members, they gain invaluable experience that builds a deep set of skills. This level of specialization fosters strong collaboration across our firm to bring a range of services and solutions to our clients.

This positions us to be valued business advisors – one of our firm's primary strategies.

Services can sound similar across the industry. How do you differentiate in the market and is innovation changing the way audit and tax are done?

It is changing. Audit and tax are somewhat of a commodity, so we have to deliver it differently. The end result is the same: it's an audit opinion or a tax return, so it's how we deliver it – going further to assess risk and identify trends for our clients that will differentiate us.

If we can deliver more efficiently, this can translate into different pricing models. If we can use automation or another tool, we can translate this into an advantage.

With technology, I can't even envision what it's going to look like five years from now because it's moving so fast. We're already hiring people for our team with skills in artificial intelligence to help us think about how we can use big data.

Is technology helping to enable people to do their jobs and do you worry that it will take away the personal touch?

Technology helps our people do their jobs better. We're always going to be a relationship business and people are always going to have problems that they need solved. It's more than just running numbers through a computer and getting a return. It's about how we interpret information and how we help our clients understand what the data means so they can position their businesses.

Despite all of your management responsibility, how important is it for you to continue to have client interaction?

I continue to do this because it's extremely important. Staying in touch with my clients means I can remain current with what is going on in the profession, both technically and technologically. Rather than just sitting in and offering advice to my partners, I can experience what is working well and what isn't and, collectively, we can come up with solutions to better serve our clients. Otherwise, as leaders we may become theoretical

and not practical, and it becomes difficult to be a leader when one is so far removed from what is happening.

With such a diverse client base, how valuable is it to have that diversity mirrored within your workforce?

Diversity brings about diverse thinking, diverse opinions, and varied ways of approaching situations. This mirrors how our clients operate.

We can't expect to have diverse thought with a room full of people from a single background or set of similar experiences. We even have clients who specifically request to work with diverse teams. If we don't mirror what our buyers are looking for, we're leaving a lot of potential opportunity on the table.

How critical is the New York market for Baker Tilly?

It's extremely important. We want to expand our New York presence because the market has massive commerce in many different industries, including financial services, real estate, private equity, etc. There are also a growing number of other industries here that haven't always received the same attention as financial services. Expanding our presence here helps us cover more of the footprint of the city and touch more people.

Is Baker Tilly positioned to compete with the larger firms in the industry?

There are opportunities where we compete well against the Big Four because we deliver the technical expertise of the Big Four while being more hands on and more competitively priced. Compared to a smaller firm, our prices might be slightly higher but we have such a depth of services we can bring beyond commodity audit and tax. We don't go to market by price, we go to market by value.

Our prime competition is the mid-tier brands, where we compete on culture and how we deliver products.

What advice do you give to young people who are interested in building a career in the profession?

They need to put their best selves forward every day and focus on learning new things and building a network from day one. If one makes it a priority to continue learning and to build a network, their path will be unlimited.

How valuable is an accounting education?

It's the language of business. Everything is fundamental to accounting. ●