

Making a Difference

An Interview with
Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden, Chief Executive Officer, Ruder Finn, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE *With more than 25 years of experience in communications for multinational companies including Novartis, Cisco, HP, Pfizer, PepsiCo, and Microsoft, Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden has developed particular skills in global communications consulting, including a focus on leadership and CEO positioning; global corporate reputation and brand strategy; acquisition/merger, global internal engagement campaigns; and crisis and issues management.*



Kathy Bloomgarden

Dr. Bloomgarden is the author of Trust: The Secret Weapon of Effective Business Leaders, and holds a B.A. from Brown University and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University in Political Science and Chinese studies.

COMPANY BRIEF *Ruder Finn, Inc. (ruderfinn.com) is one of the world's largest independent communications agencies with dual headquarters in the U.S. and China. Founded in 1948, Ruder Finn serves the global and local communication needs of over 250 corporations, governments, and nonprofit organizations. The agency is organized around four strategic pillars that reflect its core areas of expertise: Health & Wellness, Corporate Reputation & Transformation, Technology & Innovation, and Consumer Connections. RFI Studios, the agency's full-service digital practice, leads the industry in designing and developing internal collaboration platforms, building conversations and communities around brands, and staying top-of-mind in the world of mobile applications.*

What is the secret to the success for Ruder Finn?

We're one of the first PR agencies in the world and that is an important heritage to us. We all feel a sense of passion that we want to make a difference and do something meaningful. The industry has changed and evolved, but we still keep that passion. It's not about getting bigger or grabbing a position in short-lived current trends; it's about shaping opinion, driving behaviors, and making a difference. Being an impactful leader in the PR industry and in society is what keeps us motivated and connects us to our purpose.

How much of a focus are start-ups for your company?

After we spun out our regional operations, we strengthened our client base, and now approximately 86 percent of our clients are global multinationals. Working closely together with companies leading in their industries, we realized that many of them were going through sizeable transformations. By shifting our focus toward helping companies going through business-model changes, we strengthened our competitive expertise in reinforcing external reputations, executive leadership, and employee engagement. These skillsets became an underpinning for many of our client programs.

We realize that many large companies want to re-energize themselves, move faster, and create a start-up-like mentality within their organizations. We developed a practice within the agency that brings start-ups to meet and share ideas with large multinational companies to solve problems, and create exciting projects that can be implemented within a short timeframe. We prioritize staying connected to the start-up community so that we can stay involved in emerging trends. Internally, we strive to build a culture that is dynamic and nimble, setting an example for these larger companies who are looking to disrupt themselves.

Do you need to be working very high up in those companies or are you working at multiple levels?

Change can be a painful process, so we often work together with senior management to help top leaders inspire their people to be supportive of those transitions. We work day to day as partners with communication teams, collaborating with HR, investor relations, and business leaders at the national and international level.

We have a very deep partnership with our clients. Our average tenure for clients is approximately 10 to 11 years, which is unusually high in our industry. We are experts at storytelling, building the narrative, and creating compelling content that opens dialogues with key stakeholders.

Is there specific industry expertise? How broad are the capabilities?

Communications requires a wide range of skills: creative, social, innovative – with deep vertical industry knowledge. We have to be ready to hit the ground running on new assignments, so having a deep background in our key industry sectors is imperative. Our teams are well-versed in the right social channels to drive engagement specific to the industry vertical we are working in.

When we consider talent, we don't look to only hire people who have been in another agency for 10 years. We want new thinking, and value creativity and curiosity. Young people have an opportunity to play an important role early in their careers. I have a reverse mentor – a young person who meets with me every morning – and helps me make sure I'm doing all I can with my social media channels.

We want our agency to be one that marries bold thinking, innovation, and creativity. Design is becoming a critical element in communications, so we are experimenting with new design and video technologies to deepen the way we create and share stories and experiences.

For many people, change can be scary. How hard is it to get buy in?

Multinational companies are going through great changes as the market continues to advance at a rapid pace.

The internal communications work we do for multinationals has to touch people with a strong emotional chord, as well as sustain an open and authentic conversation that provides details about changes that are happening. Today, the process of change never reaches an end point; it is more of a journey. This can cause uncertainty and anxiety. To help allay concerns, we have to ensure that people know the goals a company's senior management are trying to reach and inspire a shared belief in the mission of the company.

What are the keys to a successful client relationship?

Every agency has a different culture and personality, and different areas of specialty. We have to have a true partnership with our clients and a good chemistry fit so we can move nimbly together. Relationships are key. ●