

Making Magic by Providing Invisible Services

An Interview with Victoria J. Cerami,
Chief Executive Officer, Cerami & Associates, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Victoria Cerami leads Cerami & Associates, one of the premier acoustical and technology engineering firms in the country. She is passionate about the firm's role in public outreach with a focus on mentorship and sponsorship of women. Cerami sits on the board of ACE (Architecture, Construction, and Engineering) which mentors inner city high school students. The firm sponsors a woman each year entering college to study mechanical engineering in honor of her father, Vito Cerami. She is also a board member for the New York Building Congress, member of the University of Hartford's Board of Regents, Co-Chairwoman of the Council of Industry Women, and past Chairwoman of the University of Hartford's Institute of Science and Technology Building Initiative Program. Cerami holds a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Hartford and a master's degree in business from MIT's Sloan School of Business.



Victoria J. Cerami

He saw that buildings had noise and vibration problems that were not being addressed as an element of good design. He raised that awareness and, frankly, created an industry. He did this in the spirit of being a good engineer, but one who really cared about his clients. He also made sure that the projects that he worked on were the very best, and that continues today. Those are the values that I hold on to.

How has the market for Cerami's services evolved since its inception?

In 1965, our clients were developers and architects. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was my father's largest client and he worked on everything they designed. My father passed away in August 1987 and the stock market crashed in October, so the industry pivoted away from constructing really large buildings. This led us to start doing interior renovations where we look inside buildings and find ways to make them better and optimize them. Today, we have a very diverse portfolio of work with interiors now being a significant portion of our work.

How do you describe Cerami to those who may not be aware of its work?

Cerami is a company that provides services that no one knows are there; they are invisible. When you walk into a building elevator and your cell phone still works or you can easily access the technology in your conference room, we were there. If you walk into a building and you don't feel vibration from the subway line below, we were there. If you are traveling, and clearly hear the last call for boarding over the PA system, we were there. We are both a technology and an acoustical design firm, designing from the perspective of the user. If your experience of a space is seamless, acoustics or connectivity goes unnoticed, our design is a success.

With clients as diverse as Four Seasons Restaurant and Hudson Yards, are each of Cerami's projects customized?

Yes, but physics is physics, and understanding sound, understanding vibration, and understanding how things work is physics. It then really becomes about the application of physics to each different problem.

The first step is understanding the story. For instance, Four Seasons Restaurant was

known as a restaurant that was this oasis of quiet in New York. It was a peaceful place. The owners knew it was quiet, but they didn't really understand that this quiet was a signature element of their brand. When they took their new space located over the train tracks in Grand Central Station, we needed to figure out how to recreate that sense of peace and quiet. We not only put recommendations together, but we created a model so that they could listen to it and feel it.

So, do we do the same things over and over again? No, because we have to create something unique that gets the client to actually listen to their project as it is being designed so they can determine if it works.

As a leading woman in business, how important is it to invest the time to mentor and provide opportunities for the next generation of women leaders?

It is very important. The women who work at our office have been mentored by me and they now mentor high school kids, so there is a whole string of mentorship. I didn't have a female mentor, but I was lucky to have some very strong men who were great mentors.

My suggestion to the women in the office is to continue to look behind you and pull others forward because, in doing so, you become a leader. You learn how to lead, because that is what great leaders do. Great leaders are not ones that pontificate, but those who look to see how they can help and bring out the best in other people, and that is what I try to do.

How critical has it been to attract and retain top talent as Cerami continues to grow?

We are always looking for talent and when we find talented, curious people, we do everything we can to keep them engaged and on a path of growth. Our entrepreneurial atmosphere is well known in the industry and we also attract intern applicants from the best engineering programs in the country, including many global applicants as well. I feel like I have been a change agent in the evolution of the company, but it is not all just me. I throw an idea out and then encourage solutions from many different directions and angles. This is really exciting and makes Cerami an interesting, dynamic and collaborative place to work. ●

FIRM BRIEF Cerami & Associates (ceramiassociates.com) has earned a reputation as one of the premier acoustical design and technology consulting companies in the world and is the largest women-owned firm working on building design projects globally. The firm partners with world-class developers and architects on their signature projects, including Hudson Yards, Museum of Modern Art, Comcast Technology Center, Facebook, Google, Massachusetts General Hospital Lunder Building, TWA Hotel, The Ford Foundation, Four Seasons Restaurant and Princeton University. Cerami & Associates develops a signature voice in terms of how a building sounds or perhaps how it doesn't sound at all. It also enables its inhabitants to connect to one another through technology. The firm brings 54 years of experience to the user experience.

When your father, Vito Cerami, founded Cerami & Associates in 1965, what was his vision and has that vision remained consistent over the years?

My father's vision of providing thoughtful client focus and doing great work in taking care of clients' problems is certainly the same today.