

Community Commitment

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

EDITORS' NOTE Kathy Bloomgarden is the CEO of Ruder Finn, one of the largest independent public relations agencies in the world, serving clients across four key pillars: Technology & Innovation, Corporate & Public Trust, Health & Wellness, and Consumer Connections. Over her more than 30 years of experience in corporate reputation management, she has developed communications programs for a large range of clients, including Tencent, Visa, Bosch, Disney, Sanofi, Metlife, Kohler, Astra Zeneca and Novartis. Bloomgarden is a board member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Partnership for New York City and the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health, and a member of the Arthur Page Society and PR Seminar. She is the author of Trust: The Secret Weapon of Effective Business Leaders. Bloomgarden holds a BA from Brown University and an MA and PhD from Columbia University in political science and Chinese studies.



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on a global perspective and localized market knowledge that redefine leadership, reimagine the marketplace, and rethink customer experiences around a shared sense of purpose. Ruder Finn has offices across four continents including the U.S., Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Wholly-owned agencies within Ruder Finn Group include: Ruder Finn Inc., RLA Collective, RF Bloom, and SPI Group. The company recently acquired Osmosis Films, a full-service creative agency and production com-

pany specializing in content communications strategies leveraging video, animation, and other visual storytelling formats.

The world is fighting a public health crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?

I am humbled and awed by the many healthcare and essential workers who have bravely battled this unusual public health crisis. My husband is a doctor, so I know firsthand the struggle with providing what has now become round-the-clock care despite very uncomfortable and dire circumstances, where COVID-19

has put so many in harm's way. The mental burnout is real for those on the front lines even more than for the rest of us who have also suffered from pandemic-induced anxiety. I hope that we will continue to see these heroes sharing their stories because that has been critical for the rest of us in understanding the real issues and most importantly how we get through this difficult time. We have to acknowledge and appreciate the outsized burden the pandemic is putting on front line workers. We need to work together to support them and overcome this.

How critical is it for there to be a strong public/private partnership to ensure a safe and effective reopening of New York?

It is critical to have a public/private partnership where the public sector provides leadership on measures we have to take as a community to both be safe and to build back stronger. Strong public leadership, exemplified by Governor Cuomo, helped turn one of the U.S.'s hot spots into one of the safest cities. Moving forward, collaboration between all sectors will be critical. We need the government to be open to the ideas of private companies, and we need private companies to apply their innovation engines to our city's most pressing problems, including transportation, contact tracing and more. We've seen some of these partnerships already – from Mount Sinai Health System's STOP COVID NYC app, to the MTA's call for private companies to help keep our subways safer than ever through the Transit Innovation Partnership project. In some ways, I

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predict that the pandemic will induce a level of creativity and city-improvement that we haven’t experienced in decades.

How concerned are you about New York’s future and its ability to remain a leading global city?

New York has faced the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic – death, joblessness, and economic depression, at an enormous scale, but scale is what New York is all about. We’ve faced worse, and we’ll face worse again. We always come back. We’re New Yorkers: we’re motivated, determined, ambitious, and we never give up. I have no doubt that New York will return. Of course, there will be changes, but New Yorkers have evolution built into their DNA. As we reawaken post-pandemic, I predict that we’ll see big tech move into the city even more quickly. We’ll see more innovation. Just consider that more than 100,000 restaurants in New York City have pivoted to provide outdoor dining since July alone, and we’ve seen many businesses get creative with their COVID-19 reopenings. Disruption and creation are two sides of the same experience – we will recover. What’s key is continuing to find leaders who can inspire us and keep our spirits up. Governor Cuomo has seen us through the pandemic thus far. More leaders need to step up to get New York City through the next few years of recovery.

What do you see as a company’s responsibility to the communities it serves?

As the CEO of Ruder Finn, a company founded and headquartered here in New York

City, I take our commitment to the New York community very seriously. We made the decision to close our New York City office very early on in the pandemic because we knew that our employees did not feel safe. More than that, our employees were commuting in from various parts of the city, New Jersey, Connecticut and Long Island. It was our responsibility to see that their commute could put their families, neighbors and fellow subway-riders in danger. By shutting down our office, we were helping to protect more than just our employees. On a bigger scale, it’s never been more important for companies to be in tune with the communities they serve and to listen to all voices – authentic engagement helps us do a better job for ourselves and for our clients, and creates real value with a multiplying effect that’s compounded given how fast the news cycle is moving and now that online social channels have become a primary means of communication while we “stay at home.” As a communications professional, I can tell you that community engagement is no longer just important to marketing, it’s a business imperative.

What are the keys to effective leadership during challenging and uncertain times?

Today, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders are faced with heartbreaking decisions as we encounter unprecedented circumstances with implications that touch every one of us in terms of how we live and work. These are trying times on a new scale, both

professionally and personally. Leaders must understand that missteps will be inevitable. Understanding this balance and managing these risks are key to steering through not only the current crisis, but also the uncertain future, and from some leaders over the past few months we can glean three key lessons to help guide us forward: (1) be present even when you don’t have all the answers, (2) let disruption be a reason for reinvention, so we can choose who we want to be coming out of this, and (3) be aspirational to inspire employees and aim high even when there’s no guarantee of success.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers during this difficult and unprecedented time?

Raise your hand and roll up your sleeves. For young people coming out of college, it’s certainly daunting to start your career in a remote work setting and during a time when there is so much uncertainty, but that’s why you need to make the extra effort to be proactive and get noticed. At Ruder Finn, we decided to still have our executive training program this summer, even as other companies put interns and new hires on hold. What we’ve seen is that despite working remotely, young people who are willing to jump in and stay in close contact with their mentors and managers are thriving. Everyone is still adjusting to remote work, but we’re in it together, and many recent grads have no fear of technology anyway. The lesson here is don’t be shy, dive right in, and you’ll be fine. ●

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