

Personal Branding

An Interview with Erica Lee, Chief Executive Officer, Marquis Who's Who

EDITORS' NOTE *In 2021, Erica Lee was named the first female CEO of Marquis Who's Who. She is responsible for driving the overall strategy of the business while improving operational efficiency of the company through software development, product updates, new process initiatives and effective personnel management. Lee has volunteered for organizations such as Autism Speaks, The Interfaith Nutrition Network, Island Harvest and the Community Mainstreaming*



Erica Lee

Associates and served on the Board of Directors of the Early Years Institute, Caribbean Education Foundation, and the Summer Institute of the Arts at Yale, as well as on the Advisory Board of the Uniondale Foundation for Educational Excellence (UFEE), and the exploratory committee for the Lincoln Center Institute for Arts in Education Charter School. She was formerly the Advisory Board Chairperson of Birthright AFRICA and now serves as an ambassador for the organization. She is presently a Board Member of Harbor Childcare and Early Learning Center. Lee is also a member of the Collective of Concerned Black Professionals. She was recognized for her youth services work by winning a Long Island Child and Education Advocate Award and, in 2019, was honored by the Community Mainstreaming Associates for her advocacy and support of organizations providing resources for adults with special needs and developmental disabilities. Lee is a graduate of Yale University and has served as an Alumni Delegate-At-Large.

COMPANY BRIEF *Established in 1898 by company founder, Albert Nelson Marquis, Marquis Who's Who (marquiswhoswho.com) began publishing biographical data in 1899. Since then, Marquis has remained the standard for reliable and comprehensive biographical data. The family of Marquis Who's Who publications presents unmatched coverage of the lives of today's leaders and achievers from the United States and around the world, and from every significant field of endeavor. While Marquis continues the time-honored tradition of publishing print titles, an emphasis is placed on creating powerful online tools and products and exceptional branding services and networking opportunities.*

How has Marquis Who's Who adapted its business during this challenging and uncertain time?

Marquis Who's Who is comprised of a driven, determined, dynamic, diverse and dedicated team who is devoted to documenting, propelling and preserving the careers, achievements and legacies of the most fascinating, influential and noteworthy individuals around the world. A company with as long of a history as Marquis Who's Who, which was established in 1898, has definitely operated through many of America's periods of turmoil, upheaval, triumphs and change. It was incredibly important to retain the same standards and culture even during one of the most tumultuous times in modern history. By maintaining consistency while we transitioned through the challenges of a remote and hybrid work environment, we were able to retain talent and create an overall sense of stability. These are stressful times for all of us, so I also think it is important to help your employees unwind by offering fun, non-work related virtual events, happy hours and webinars to support employee engagement, team building and give employees a chance to showcase hidden talent.

Will you provide an overview of Marquis Who's Who's services and how the company has evolved and transformed under your leadership?

I think everyone has heard of the term Who's Who and used in in their own lexicon

as it has been synonymous with an elite grouping of individuals at the top of their respective industries and fields. Marquis has a long history of documenting the biographies of noteworthy individuals across a multitude of career fields and industries. Our founder, Albert Nelson Marquis, traveled America in search of the best and brightest in order to publish our flagship directory, *Who's Who in America*, in 1899. We have actually covered 22 U.S. presidential administrations. Since its inception, Marquis has been committed to preserving legacies of our biographical listees so that their stories will be recorded for future generations to gain insight and inspiration. While Marquis has made an indelible imprint in American culture and zeitgeist, sitting at the helm during such a pivotal period in history caused me to reflect upon Marquis' own legacy.

Marquis has and always will be an invitation-only organization, meaning you can apply, but you cannot buy your way into the organization. Upon application, every candidate is interviewed by a submissions director before inclusion. Marquis was primarily a publishing company with over 24 different book titles segmented by industry or geographic region. In the early 2000s, we launched a subscription model through Marquis Biographies Online, which is the searchable directory that is accessible for research purposes by many of the major academic institutions around the world, corporate libraries, private libraries and media outlets as well.

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In 2016, when I joined Marquis, we moved the needle further and created a personal branding division, which focused on lifting these interesting individuals off the pages of our registry and gave them life online and in print. We were surprised to see how many of our listees did not own their own domain name, didn't have a personal website or a video biography. We created a host of products and services to help our biographical listees brand themselves online, gain greater visibility, tell their stories and leave a lasting legacy for future generations through news releases, features in the *Marquis Millennium Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *United Airlines Hemispheres*, *Bloomberg Business*, *Forbes*, etc.

Aside from adding additional services to our business model, I began to delve into my network to connect with companies owned and operated by minorities and women in order to forge strategic partnerships for the benefit of our biographical listees. I enlisted the expertise of attorney, political commentator, television and broadcast personality Star Jones to create an innovative fireside chat series called The Star Treatment for our distinguished listees. These one-on-one, in-person interviews with Ms. Jones delved into the true spirit of what made our listees successful. During the pandemic, we were able to continue to create meaningful content while conducting interviews safely over Zoom.

I also resurrected *Who's Who of American Women*, which was first published in 1959 but went defunct for over ten years, and repurposed it to encompass professional women worldwide. While we will always publish our print titles like *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in Law*, *Who's Who in Healthcare and Medicine* and *Who's Who of Distinguished Professionals*, our branding products now truly provide value for our listees from a digital perspective. I would say nearly 70 percent of our business is now driven through personal branding. Now that more business is done online rather than in person, it is more important than ever to have an online presence. We have a number of strategic partnerships lined up for 2021 along with launching an initiative to help the next generation of innovators called the Emerging Leaders program which will connect up-and-comers with influential mentors.

How engrained is diversity and inclusion in Marquis Who's Who's culture and values?

When I think of the past year in review and where we are today, the word "syndemic" comes to mind. We have truly witnessed the convergence of multiple epidemics that have reached their tipping point, whether that is from a public health, systemic racism, or gender inequality perspective. Maintaining status quo was no longer acceptable and companies were forced to take a hard look and address some of these issues within their own organizations. We are also witnessing changes within the leadership of this country with a minority female Vice President, Kamala Harris, and the installation of Janet Yellen as the first female Treasury

Secretary. Companies are paying attention to changing tides and understand that DE&I is not just a hip acronym, but something their employees and customers are holding them accountable for. It is important to acknowledge that just because you are a half black, half Asian female CEO, like myself, doesn't mean you were born with a DE&I playbook. I think that was a shortcoming for many companies during the uprisings last year. They looked around to find the minorities and sent frantic emails asking them for help solely based on their race or gender. That was neither a fair nor genuine approach.

Prior to the pandemic, I was proud of leading an organization that was comprised of 82 percent women. At Marquis, women not only had a seat at the table, we were instrumental in building and designing the table at which we sat. I was in an interesting position as I advocated for improving our outreach to the minority and LGBTQ+ communities, while recruiting more males to our team. Our VP of Human Resources and Development, Deborah Morrissey, was tasked with creating an entire program around diversity and inclusion recruitment. Concurrently, we took advantage of a precarious job market in which we were able to attract seasoned professionals who were at pivotal points in their careers. We are also actively recruiting individuals who are looking to re-enter the workforce after a lengthy hiatus and others who were stagnant in their other companies. Our new recruiting efforts are breathing renewed zeal into our employees and creating a beautiful mosaic of independent thinkers from a multitude of backgrounds. We also created a pipeline with colleges and even high schools for summer internships, particularly in underserved local communities, from which we are drawing new talent.

Outside of our internal structure, I formed a Selection Committee, launched the Marquis Maker's List series and tapped Star Jones, who has made DE&I her life's work, as the Executive Editor. The Marquis Maker's Lists seek to highlight, celebrate and recognize those people whose ideas, philosophies, positions, example, standards, talents, gifts, aptitude, discoveries, innovations or breakthroughs have the ability to influence, effect change and transform the world we live in. Each list consists of those who by their thoughts, words and deeds, inspire, motivate and encourage us all to be our best selves through service, ingenuity and action. Each month we compile two lists, one main focus and a supplemental list, which are inspired by or coincide with awareness or celebrated heritage months.

Our May lists were devoted to Innovators in our version of STEM (Science, Technology, Education and Medicine) and Asian/Pacific American Catalysts for Change. Our June Lists focused on LGBTQ+ Catalysts for Change and Men of Prominence Making a Difference or our "Lions List." This month in the spirit of Independence Day, we are highlighting Attorneys, Activists and Agents of Change. Our supplemental list the Peacekeepers, Protectors and First Responders will pay homage to those who risk their lives to preserve our freedom,

defend our civil liberties, and keep us safe every day. Our Makers are not just people you know, but we are breaking news by bringing to the forefront names you don't currently know, but need to know. The Maker's List series has been featured on Cheddar TV and Nasdaq Spotlight, and in *The New York Times*, *The Hill*, *The Ladders*, and *Business Insider*, just to name a few.

I acknowledge that it took over 120 years for Marquis Who's Who to appoint its first woman CEO and this is indicative of the fact that we have a long way to go to make top down changes in diversity, equity and inclusion. Under my leadership, I am committed to doing the hard work, both internally and externally, that will create a positive and lasting impact on this organization for years to come. Concurrently, I am determined to help chip away at this ceiling until there is no glass left, and I stand ready with my heels on.

What advice do you offer young people beginning their careers during this challenging and uncertain time?

There is no longer just a singular path to success in business. Young people should ask themselves, what am I passionate about and what is my own value system. Then, find companies that align with your own moral compass and apply for internships and positions. If you are hired, you need to show up each day thinking of ways to improve productivity and build efficiency. After a few months of learning the lay of the land, start suggesting ideas to management. If they are easily implementable, then ask to lead the project, seeing it through to execution. Small wins will begin to stack up and eventually you will be noticed. Also, if there are non-work-related team exercises, sign up. Become a team player with valuable insight and you will set yourself apart from your peers.

Fortunately, the digital age enables young people to carve their own paths in business from earlier ages. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Patreon and other social media platforms create a space for reaching a broad audience, monetizing ideas, and curating new content. Similarly, I tell young people to find their passion, then study the biographies and stories of influencers in that space. Dissect how they think, their approach, watch videos about their journey and how they became successful at their craft, and then create your own lane. Just because something looks easy does not mean it is. Successful people are incredibly disciplined, wake up with purpose and ascribe to a methodology that works for them. Warren Buffett is quoted as having read a biography of his professor while he was a student at Columbia Business School that was listed in *Who's Who in America* that changed his approach to business and ultimately led him to start GEICO.

Do your research, build a business plan, then set your plan in motion. The worst thing you can do is stay in research mode, without ever taking action. You can theorize forever, but until you put your idea into practice, you will never know if your hypothesis works or not. Moreover, in these scenarios, you will either be inviting yourself to the table or making your own table. ●