

Transparency, Dialogue, and Knowledge Sharing

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, AstraZeneca 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.*



Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden

FIRM BRIEF *Founded in 1948, Ruder Finn (ruderfinn.com) has defined and redefined PR for more than 70 years, shaping communications that help move industry-defining brands, companies and leaders from what's now to what's next. Uniquely co-headquartered in the U.S. and China, Ruder Finn provides clients with bold communications strategies based 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 company specializing in content communications strategies leveraging video, animation, and other visual storytelling formats.*

How critical is being purpose-driven to the success of leading companies today?

Incorporating a sense of purpose into leading companies today is 100 percent necessary. We cannot be a credible voice in this world if we cast a blind eye as leaders toward the challenges we are facing both globally and in

our own backyards. These challenges include pandemic-related economic, social, and health issues, as well as big societal issues from climate change to racial equity. As human beings, we all have skin in the game. As leaders, we have a responsibility to help be a force for positive change. In fact, countless studies show that companies which deliver on a sense of purpose are better able to attract and retain top talent. Research by author Raj Sisodia found that companies that operate with a clear and

driving sense of purpose, beyond the goal of just making money, outperform the S&P 500. "The sense of being part of something greater than yourself can lead to high levels of engagement, high levels of creativity and the willingness to partner across functional and product boundaries within a company, which are hugely powerful," said Rebecca Henderson, a Professor at Harvard Business School. Each of us has a responsibility to explore the ethical and philosophical dimensions of our work and how we participate as global citizens in our communities.

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Many people I know dropped off meals or donated supplies to local frontline healthcare workers. In New York City, as well as in many other cities, we clapped out the windows and outside hospitals at 7 PM nightly to show our appreciation for those who were risking their health to help others. Helping others, making positive change, acknowledging challenges and problem-solving – these are what make people heroes, and we all need heroes to do good, give us hope and inspire us. This is equally true within companies as it is in our individual lives.

What are the keys to maintaining culture and purpose as a company grows in size and scale?

Big companies inevitably need to evolve to grow bigger and continue to be successful. Look at many industries today where disruption has been the precursor to high growth, including the entertainment industry (those of us over a certain age remember going to rent movies or buy music at a physical store), the telecom industry (was there ever really a time before mobile phones?), the news industry, and, of course, travel, auto, technology and many more. When companies think strategically about “how” and not just “how quickly” they can evolve, and what their vision for the future is, most often a purpose-driven model, may be harder to achieve, but in the long run is more productive and fulfilling. Three things are important to keep in mind: (1) stay true to core values, (2) gather real insights into what matters to key constituents including both internal and external audiences, and (3) execute on strategy transparently, sharing information to ensure an army of champions around the company are able to walk the walk as well as talk the talk in following the plan toward an aspirational future. Remember that 88 percent of Americans say they would buy products from a company leading with purpose. Doing good and creating new business models to incorporate doing good into business frameworks is good for business.

Do you feel it is a responsibility for leading companies to be engaged in the communities they serve and to be a force for good in society?

Being a force for good as a business is not only important in terms of responsibility to the communities we operate within, but also a business imperative for our staff. According to Deloitte’s 2017 Volunteer Survey, nearly 90 percent of working Americans believed

companies that sponsored volunteer opportunities had better working environments than those that did not. At Ruder Finn, we recently launched a volunteer initiative where those who donate their time volunteering can get comped time off to the equivalent number of hours, up to a limit. We also asked those volunteering to share stories and pictures from their efforts to help us all engage together as a community. Around the holidays, like many others, we do a food drive and a toy drive. Giving back to our community not only helps us generate a shared sense of purpose, excitement and achievement within the company, but also engenders loyalty from current and prospective clients, and casts a positive glow on our company brand. Plus, “doing good” tends to be exponential, and one good thing often leads to another, meaning there is a multiplier effect to all the good we do which makes it even more worthwhile.

What are the key characteristics you look for when hiring talent?

I’m just going to say this out loud: I don’t put much stock in resumes. Yes, people need the skills and experience to do their jobs well, but what sets them apart is hunger, passion, commitment and chemistry, and that’s what I look for when hiring talent. People are often surprised by the fact that as a CEO, I roll up my sleeves and am very involved in many of our important accounts. I expect the same level of commitment from those I work with. People also sometimes raise an eyebrow that I work with so many young people – we don’t have a traditional hierarchy at Ruder Finn and it’s intentional. Those who step up are given opportunities, those who have great ideas are given reign to execute them, those who make their voice heard and raise their hand are given platforms to shout from. There are some careers where this isn’t possible, like being a doctor, where you must pay your dues before climbing the ladder and gaining more responsibility, and I have the utmost respect for doctors. In some other businesses, like in public relations, we can learn in a reverse mentorship manner from the young if they have the right intentions and enthusiasm, as we also learn hand in hand from those more seasoned who teach a different skillset. A McKinsey 2021 Future of Work survey reported that respondents at companies with very effective talent management are six times more likely to report higher total return to shareholders (TRS) than competitors, versus those at companies with very ineffective talent management. Therefore, with the right culture in place, we not only have the ability to attract and retain the go-getters, entrepreneurial-spirited and creative problem-solvers, but we can advance learning opportunities for talent on every level and, in turn, improve business outcomes.

How do you define your own purpose?

I have long felt a kinship for Chinese culture. I got my master’s degree in Chinese Studies and I speak Chinese and appreciate being able to converse when I am in Asia and work alongside our ten offices in Greater China. A key tenet of what we do in public relations

for our clients is help companies work hard to grow trust with their constituents, and building trust based on authentic values and caring relationships – all within the construct of the traditional Chinese idea of “guanxi,” or relationship-building, which is an important part of our business. These values have given me an outsized foundation for my belief system and how I operate both as an individual and as a CEO leading a multinational company.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started and there was a rise in Asian hate, this sparked a particular fire in my core. I am also involved with the China Institute as a board member, where our mission is to help promote a greater understanding of China and its culture. I hope that we can make a difference in bridging tensions and bringing people together.

My father was a photographer and he believed that looking through a camera lens literally taught him to see the world and its challenges from many different vantage points, a lesson he carried on throughout all he did both in his personal life and in his professional activities. He always advised that taking a step back and looking at things through a new perspective was important. Continuing that vision of helping others to stretch themselves to see things through the opposing viewpoints of others is a key part of what we hope to achieve for all our clients at Ruder Finn, and in all we do, and it is important to my own sense of purpose.

What are some of the big challenges and transformations you’ve gone through in your career?

When I started at Ruder Finn, I was in a back-office research position. As I worked my way up into management positions, I made a proposal to expand our business into China. At that time, no other Western PR agencies had done this, and it was a risk, but given my deep knowledge of Chinese culture and personal commitment, it was something we pursued and this venture proved to be highly successful. Ruder Finn is now one of the most sought-after PR agencies in Asia and was recently ranked by marketing professionals in China as a Top Agency Performer. Likewise, when I became more personally interested in healthcare due to my husband’s practice in medicine, I launched a new healthcare practice at Ruder Finn, and this continues to be our biggest and most successful sector of expertise in the agency. Nearly every PR agency now has a healthcare practice, making us pioneers in this as we were in our expansion into China. I’ve learned that when you have an authentic personal passion that you can connect to in your career, you are better able to be creative and ideate to overcome challenges, and it is more fulfilling and productive than when you try to step-up your career in a more transactional way. Rolling up my sleeves to get involved in work I am personally dedicated to has helped me achieve success not only for myself, but for Ruder Finn, and I think this is a trait that I have helped to instill in those I work with for our greater ongoing agency success.

How do you define success and what drives you every day to achieve?

Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce, has said, “To be truly successful, companies need to have a corporate mission that is bigger than making a profit.” It may sound silly, but I’ve always thought that each of us can use our skills for good, even public relations. In PR, for example, when we can uncover a wonderful story that helps a company bring to life how it is delivering on its mission and vision and helping its customers, that’s success. I take pride in these daily accomplishments and in doing a stellar job for each and every client no matter how big or small. Of course, I want the agency to garner high revenues and achieve great profit margins, but it goes deeper than that. There is something about being useful, about doing things at work and in your daily personal life that helps people and clients, that defines success. Success is a balance. When you find things that you’re good at, it motivates you to do more and better. If it’s too easy then it’s not fun, and if it’s not fun then you need to challenge yourself to try new things. Every day, my motivation is taking a humble pride in doing good for clients and in sharing my knowledge with those I work with so they can carry on the Ruder Finn legacy.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

We are seeing a new style of effective leadership emerge out of the pandemic, built on transparency, dialogue, and knowledge sharing. At Ruder Finn, we have coined this trio of keys to effective leadership “TDK.” Leaders with TDK help drive positivity even in difficult times, and great leaders can drive positivity beyond their own company and into the societal zeitgeist. In this new age, businesses and their leaders are emerging as primary, trusted sources of information, and they are becoming true influencers for behaviors from how we manage our personal health to how we think about our future. With this power comes a higher than ever degree of responsibility, and it is crucial that leaders and businesses consider their impact and how their actions can help both close the gaps in sentiment we see across demographics, and improve the outlook of society overall.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Most people today will tell you to make sure you create boundaries to have balance in your life, and that a successful career requires a successful and separate personal life. Albert Einstein said, “A calm and modest life brings more happiness than the pursuit of success combined with constant restlessness.” I do agree that always looking to the next thing creates dissatisfaction with the current thing – as a side note, that’s always been my pet peeve with politicians who shake your hand without making eye contact because they’re looking around the room to see who else is there. But what I think is most important is thinking deeply about your expectations, your lifestyle, and your goals in work and in life, and making intentional and realistic choices based on these well-thought-through goals. I also advise young people to raise your hand, speak up, be proactive, don’t be afraid to make mistakes and be wrong – just be present and you will reap rewards. ●