

A Behind-the-Scenes Secret Weapon

An Interview with Jennifer Connelly, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, JConnelly

EDITORS' NOTE Jennifer Connelly is the founder and CEO of JConnelly, an award-winning independent communications agency serving clients worldwide. The New York City headquartered agency she started 20 years ago has supported hundreds of partner businesses, organizations, and leaders across a range of sectors including, financial services, technology, entertainment, food and beverage, health and wellness, nonprofit and consumer and business services. Connelly is a trusted



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C-suite adviser and a specialist in corporate positioning and reputation management, working with some of the world's most complex organizations and global business leaders. Her expertise includes business strategy, special situations, crisis communications, mergers and acquisitions, and risk management. She subscribes to the mantra of doing well by also doing good, and currently sits on the Board of Directors for the nonprofit Invest in Others. Connelly earned a spot on PR News' "Top Women in PR" list five times as well as being named one of the "50 Best Women in Business" by NJBIZ.

FIRM BRIEF JConnelly (jconnelly.com) is an integrated communications agency with offices in New York; New Jersey; Chicago; Washington, DC; Florida; and most recently Las Vegas, which was added following the 2020 acquisition of AdvisorPR. The agency works with brands in

a variety of industries and sectors including financial services, entertainment, food and beverage, professional services, health and wellness and also has a corporate communications division focused on managing complex issues and special situations. JConnelly has earned numerous industry accolades for its strategic and creative communications work include multiple PRSA Silver Anvil Awards, top PR News honors, Hermes Creative awards, MarCom Awards, Telly Awards and honors from Content Marketing

Institute, AVA Digital, and the Videographer Awards, among others. JConnelly has been voted as one of the "Best Places to Work" every year since 2011 and has also been recognized by PR News multiple times as one of the "Top Places to Work in PR." Forbes also recently named JConnelly to its 2021 America's Best PR Agencies list.

What was your vision for creating JConnelly and how do you define its purpose?

We achieve extraordinary outcomes for our clients – Period. Purpose and focus are critical to our success, coupled with an unwavering passion to win for our clients. Especially in today's world of rapid and immediate communications where everyone is a citizen journalist, we need to constantly simplify the complex and capitalize on opportunities. We view ourselves as our clients' behind-the-scenes secret weapon.

JConnelly is celebrating its 20th anniversary. How has the firm evolved over the past two decades?

Reflecting on the 20 years is both humbling and inspiring. It's incredible to see how we've grown alongside our clients, many of whom have been with us from the beginning. The communications and media world as we knew it 20 years ago – or even five years ago – is a radically different place. The complacent did not survive and many clients suffered with outdated service providers. We believe that there is a constant tension between traditional and digital strategies and recognizing that the rules are constantly changing, and we act ahead of these changes, not just react to them.

In March 2003, the same time I started JConnelly, a new "social media" platform called MySpace was launched five months later. Gmail from Google did not launch until a year later. YouTube did not post its first video to the site until more than two years after JConnelly started.

YouTube and other communications platforms that are now engrained – for better and worse – in daily life like Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter did not go live until 2004, 2005, and 2006, respectively. Instagram and Snapchat didn't come into existence until 2010 and 2011.

All of this change has changed how we as a firm fundamentally communicate, manage clients brands and reputations, and at a very basic level what we define as "media."

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Media – and society itself – today is much more fragmented and tribal and as a result we are much more data-driven to engage and communicate in the right places with the right people.

What do you feel are the characteristics of an effective communications firm?

Nimbleness. Flexibility. Instantaneous. Today, a communications agency must always be on the balls of their feet poised to execute on an agreed strategy, take advantage of an opportunity, or nip a crisis in the bud.

Having a great team with a shared values system and a commitment to excellence is critically important. We are privileged to work with some of the smartest and most creative professionals on the planet, and without a doubt, that is the key to our success.

Trust is also critical. We approach all situations with grace, integrity, and intention and work to earn trust with everyone in our ecosystem while making repairs if we feel that trust is not there. We lead with our values, starting with a commitment to take great care of our clients and one another, and to provide trusted and reliable counsel that is combined with a deep-seated commitment to relentless execution.

Probably even more critical is to adopt a mindset that if you don't evolve the way you approach modern day communications and marketing, you will fail miserably. Too many times we see brands that are operating as if it was 2005, pre iPhone days. I believe that comes from a place of fear and lack of knowledge on

all the current platforms available to us today, as well as a lack of understanding about the landscape overall. There is a lot of confusion out there about earned and paid media, social, digital, influencer relations, SEO for example, and coming soon, the next latest and greatest platform. It is our job to help our clients navigate the complex landscape and have a winning strategy focused on outcomes.

What has allowed JConnelly to build long-lasting client relationships?

Trust. The core of our job is to provide the best counsel to our clients – even if they don't want to hear it.

We have always focused on innovation so we can serve our clients in a 360 way, so we can meet them where they are and together get them where they want to be. To do that, we have to be instinctive, flexible, adaptable, and operate with a sense of urgency.

By working with our clients as honest brokers of their interests rather than simply performing transactional tasks for them, we have been able to forge partner-like relationships with hundreds of clients who have trusted JConnelly to grow and protect their brands and businesses.

We work to become an extension of our clients' teams, which means we learn their businesses inside and out and share our best counsel and recommendations – even if they might be unpopular. Our job is not to be “yes” people. Our job is to grow and protect our clients' brands at all costs. No client is the same.

They work differently and at different paces, have unique objectives and goals, results, data, and metrics that are important to them. Our strategies must reflect that. We always focus on the end goal and then work backwards when developing any strategy which drives a winning campaign.

Is JConnelly focused on specific industries and how do you define the JConnelly client?

We partner with all types of brands (new and old), CEOs and individuals during various stages of business. We work with Fortune 500s, global financial brands, tech startups, lifestyle brands and celebrities. We also focus on special situations and crisis.

Given finance, where we cut our teeth 20 years ago, is the backbone of all business over time, that allowed me to grow the firm into other sectors, including consumer and business services, technology, entertainment, food and beverage, health and wellness, and even nonprofit cause groups and initiatives. We serve our clients in ways across the communications and marketing matrixes, traditional and digital.

JConnelly places a major focus on giving. Will you discuss the firm's commitment to supporting causes and being engaged in its communities?

The secret to living is giving. A core belief is to leave this world a better place than we found it so when we can contribute and serve to have impact for those in need, I am all in. ●

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