



CARVING A PATH FOR SUCCESS

THROUGH SELF-DRIVEN INITIATIVE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DESPINA KARTSON, BY NANCY C.L. STEIN

Industry leader and BakerHostetler Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Despina Kartson took time to talk to LMA and share her thoughts on career advancement, gaining law firm leadership buy-in for marketing initiatives, necessary skills for the future, the impact of COVID-19 on legal marketing and more. Starting off as a legal secretary then paralegal, Despina has served as CMO for some of the world's most respected law firms.



DESPINA KARTSON, CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, BAKERHOSTETLER

How did you get to where you are today?

I started as a legal secretary after high school. In college, I majored in journalism, worked as legal secretary and worked as a television and radio reporter. After graduating, I became a litigation paralegal at a law firm and really liked it. I wanted to get involved in e-discovery and litigation support, which were new fields then. The firm I worked for had recently purchased a computer system to help lawyers in these areas, but needed someone to figure out how the system worked. When I expressed interest in litigation support, I was told that

if I could learn the system on my own time, I could develop the firm's service. I took the initiative, learned the system and then launched the firm's e-discovery department. After 12 years of running a profitable litigation support department, I left the firm and headed strategy and business development for two companies that provided outsourcing services to law firms and financial institutions. Then I returned to the law firm world as a CMO.

What experiences helped you progress in your career?

As a paralegal, I understood the challenges of manually handling discovery. That helped me see the benefits of automating the process. Also, working outside the law firm setting gave me a very different perspective and business development experience. My sales, business development and strategy skills all came into play as CMO.

What do you look for when hiring?

No matter the position or level, excellent oral and written communication skills are essential. I also look for someone with energy, enthusiasm and a good attitude. These qualities contribute to a positive team dynamic and help everyone stay motivated and excited. I also consider whether the person will be able to progress in the department and move into other roles.

For experienced candidates, I look for proven abilities to manage others, lead and execute on a plan. The best higher-level candidates have the skill set to work with others outside the department — like the IT and operations departments — to take an idea or a plan forward. They are the ones who can rise in the organization.

How can those starting out get on their team leader's radar and move up in the ranks?

Be intelligent. Be informed. Volunteer when opportunities arise. Identify opportunities. Come up with ideas and reach out. I'm always impressed when junior people proactively reach out, introduce themselves, tell me their role and ask how they can help.

Those who volunteer tend to be strong team members who are engaged and motivated. I want people who can participate in a team and successfully lead others on projects. I value vision and the ability to proactively identify and solve problems. A sense of humor and knowing how to talk to people are also important.

Of course, flawless, excellent work is critical. Even with all the other qualities, you won't get far unless your work is truly great.

What should those who are mid-level do to advance?

Show initiative. Volunteer and offer to lead. Be proactive in the department and beyond. Don't simply react to lawyer needs; show creativity, value and the ability to lead efforts for the lawyers. You'll earn their respect and your boss's respect too.

How do you see legal industry changes, such as changing work styles, globalization and new technologies, impacting law firm marketing?

Technology has become a basic skill now. It has been a huge factor during the COVID-19 quarantine, and I expect it will play a far greater role going forward. I think we'll see more situations where meetings, collaborations and events — communication in general — will be handled using technology solutions. Tech-based solutions offer lots of opportunities for greater creativity. Marketing professionals can play an important role in helping colleagues and lawyers use technologies to their full advantage.

Where should legal marketers look for guidance and support outside the firm?

Reach out to industry leaders and leverage their knowledge. There is true sense of camaraderie in the legal marketing industry. People share best practices and help each other. Get involved and be active in the industry generally. Senior people with a wealth of knowledge should share that knowledge, speak at conferences, be a mentor and engage with others. Find ways to give back.

What are you finding to be the greatest challenges now?

COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for resilience, adaptability, ingenuity and the need to be nimble. I started my job at BakerHostetler at the beginning of March and by week two we were shifting to remote work. Trying to bring the team together and lead through that difficult situation has been among my greatest challenges, requiring me to retool, readjust and get to know my team

and the firm's lawyers all while working remotely. Being nimble, finding a new path, and maintaining motivation and connection have all proven to be critical skills.

What trends should law firm marketers be focusing on?

We'll need to find new ways to develop business, reach out to clients and engage with prospects. Mastering new technologies and their uses will be essential, as will staying on top of social media and being well versed in how the various platforms can be used.

Engagement, caring about others and taking the time to reach out and call clients has become especially important during COVID-19. Telephone calls give lawyers the chance to learn about client struggles and concerns and then find ways to address them.

How can law firm marketers gain respect and obtain the leadership buy-in needed to implement strategies and do their jobs effectively?

Proof points of success in other law firms or professional services organizations are very important. Pilot initiatives if possible. Work with a small group of willing lawyers, test the plan and perfect it. Then share your idea with management. Let management know that you piloted it and indicate ways the lawyers felt the program helped them. Point to precedent and fact. The pilot's success will

earn you respect, enhance your credibility and gain the lawyers' support to push your initiative through.

Overall, find ways to identify your successes along the way as proof points of your skills, relevant experience and value. Offer to serve on teams, to lead projects, and show that you can handle the work and be relied on to get it done right.

How can we demonstrate the value of legal marketing to law firms?

We need to show how our skills translate into value. We need to demonstrate how we can position lawyers for success using marketing campaigns across communication channels. We need to enable the lawyers to focus on the work they do while we provide support by effectively promoting the firm and its lawyers. ■



Nancy C.L. Stein of Nancy Stein & Associates LLC is a lawyer, journalist and marketing professional who assists law firms with marketing, promotions, communications and brand recognition efforts. She's well

known for crafting award-winning descriptions that clearly differentiate firms and lawyers from their competitors.



The content in this feature correlates directly with the **Marketing Management and Leadership** domain in the LMA Body of Knowledge. To dive deeper into this subject area, head to the domain here: <http://bit.ly/LMABoKMMaL>.