

THOUGHT LEADER PROFILE

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This is the first installment in a monthly series profiling “thought leaders” in the field of legal marketing and client development. Each installment will feature the thoughts of a different expert in legal marketing on a topic that they see as a critical concern. This month’s profile features Despina Kartson, Chief Marketing Officer, Latham & Watkins. Profiles are created and produced by the LMA Resources Committee thought leaders Catherine Alman MacDonagh and John Cunningham.



DESPINA KARTSON,
Chief Marketing Officer
Latham & Watkins

Sharing Strategic Accountability

BY JOHN O. CUNNINGHAM

The world is getting flatter, and so are organizational charts at leading institutions, which are empowering employees by removing layers of bureaucracy and management.

For marketing managers, this could ultimately mean fewer roadblocks to implementation of ideas, but it also presents a challenge in leading an intergenerational work force that is hungry for promotion, recognition and meaningful impact.

“A common refrain among marketing staff, including those new to the function, is ‘I want to be strategic,’” says Despina Kartson, Chief Marketing Officer at Latham & Watkins. She believes that marketing managers must find a way to get the most out of those employees by challenging them to shape their own roles and responsibilities.

“You have to come up with your own strategic ideas [in every role],” says Kartson, asserting that employees can and should “think strategically about taking their own jobs to the next level.”

For example, Kartson points to a Latham employee who, without prompting, came up with an integration plan to incorporate lateral hires quickly into every aspect of the firm’s marketing and business development functions. “So our laterals now get automatic biographical updates on the web, inclusion in RFPs, and integration into everything we do,” she says.

Such “micro-strategies” are really important, as collectively they “move the firm forward every day,” according to Kartson, who notes that micro-strategies can be easier to implement and, if engrained as part of the team culture, can proliferate in viral fashion. “These micro-strategies can create real momentum, and alongside global marketing plans can create a real competitive edge for a firm,” she adds.

Latham also gives its marketing professionals a chance to “be strategic” by encouraging individual participation in teams that cover a range of initiatives including practice development, client teams, cross-selling, and other programs. “A member of the team might spot a business issue or challenge besetting an industry, identify how the trend presents a real business development opportunity for the firm, and put together a strategic plan that markets the firm’s expertise and credentials in that area.”

Kartson asserts that “managers should motivate their staff to be integral to the strategic process,” adding that “every idea and strategic plan does not need to be the sole preserve of management.” This is one reason she feels it is critical for marketing managers “to empower staff to take the initiative and to be a central part to the process and to notice what gets done and who gets it done,” she says. “Acknowledging individual efforts that achieve the collective good is how you perpetuate an inclusive culture.”

Managers can also get more out of people by challenging them to “get out of their comfort zones” and “give back” to their profession, to their department and to their firm, Kartson believes. “I tell my team that we all have an obligation to do our jobs, but also to give back to the firm, colleagues and the community at large,” she says. “I believe we’re fortunate to work for a firm that is committed to marketing and business development, and it’s our job to continue to earn that support and win that recognition,” she adds.

“The importance of initiative and giving back only grows with the size of the organization because you can’t create a matrix of prescribed job [duties] that will work for all functions when your organization changes daily,” Kartson concludes.

The Many Ways of Giving

Volunteering has been a career theme for Despina Kartson, starting with her rise from paralegal to litigation support director at White & Case. “I volunteered to create a conflicts database [and] just taught myself how,” she recalls. Later, Kartson was creating marketing databases too. “That was my introduction to marketing,” she says.

Her marketing enthusiasm eventually made her the Vice-President of Business Development at Bowne Business Solutions, a stepping stone to her current job.

A volunteer, who builds homes for the underprivileged, Kartson encourages fellow marketers to give back to the community, and to mentor and participate in professional associations.



Despina Kartson and daughter Alexandra King deepen their own connections at a volunteer home building project.



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