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Special Focus Pt. 2: Powerful Women in PR — 12 Role Models Share 36 Secrets of Success

Last week, we used this space to feature perspectives of six notable women in PR [[click here for Part One](#)] on opportunities for women at firms nationwide. These leaders not only discussed how (and if) the female-to-male ratio has changed among PR's top ranks, but also spoke to what they thought the PR gender mix would look like in the future—and quite a few shared secrets of their successes.

Not surprisingly, the piece won considerable attention—with thousands of tweets, in fact, helping to drive readers to the site. It also generated plenty of commentary—more than any other piece we've run here. Comments ranged from appreciation for source insights to calls for these firm leaders and others to take a more active role in reinventing their work environments. Some saw the piece as offering excellent advice—multiple readers, for example, valued Margery Kraus's concise assertion that "competence trumps gender."

Overall, the commentary was insightful as the article itself. And we invite more in this second installment, where we feature **Gail Heimann** (Weber Shandwick), **Laura Tomasetti** (360 Public Relations), **GG Johnston** (Johnston Wells), **Kathy Obert** (Edward Howard), **Becky Powell-Schwartz** (The Powell Group) and **Jennifer Graham Clary** (Burson Marsteller):



Gail Heimann  
Vice Chair  
Weber Shandwick

### "It's Tough to Fight 'Gender-Nomic' Forces" —Gail Heimann, Vice Chair, [Weber Shandwick](#)

More than 70% of our workforce is female and a tiny percentage of that group takes the path—or chooses to take the path—to the top. It is, as we all know, a complicated issue that is as much about perceived gender roles and responsibilities and the meaning of motherhood—lofty stuff that you don't really want to mess with—as anything else. The PR industry, like others, has been relatively inventive about flexible work hours, telecommuting, job sharing and other approaches that allow women (and men) to have more "balance." And those family/life-friendly policies are making a difference. We'll continue to see some impact in the years to come, perhaps more in the mid-levels of our profession than at the very top.

I would like to think that a decade from now, 50% of C-suites will have female occupants. It is tough to (politely) fight against macro-"gender-nomic" forces, tough to pierce long-established boy's clubs, and, frankly, tough to kiss your kids good-bye and jump on a plane to Singapore. For some, the upside—intellectual challenge, satisfaction at delivering results, the power of collegiality and the pure adrenaline rush you get on a good day—is worth it. Others will find those things—or "highs" that replace those things—in other places. And that's OK, too. Net: The gender balance at the top will shift—a little. But women will continue to make choices. And will continue to self-select off the C-suite track when confronted with other compelling options.

My advice:

- **Exhibit these three key PR traits.** My advice for younger women is not radically different from my advice to younger men. I think there are three qualities to success in public relations:
  1. Intellectual curiosity
  2. Resourcefulness
  3. Drive

When you love to learn and understand "stuff," when you can always, no matter what the obstacles, figure out how to get something done or how to do something different when you can't, and when you're seemingly propelled by superhuman forces, you'll succeed. It won't be about gender.

- **Make choices; don't fall into "roles."** The nuance in my advice for young women is simple: Make a choice about how you want to manage your work life and your home and family life. Be sure it's your choice, not a role you think you should play. And, above all, don't look for "balance" every day. You won't find it.
- **Lead by example.** I try very hard (and don't always succeed, I'm sure) to lead by example versus formal mentoring. But I do feel a great sense of responsibility to younger women—and to my daughters especially—to somehow prove that satisfying homelife + rewarding worklife are not only viable...but the biggest "win" you're going to get.



Laura Tomasetti  
Managing Director  
360 Public Relations

### "Consumer PR Is More Diverse" —Laura Tomasetti, Managing Director, [360 Public Relations](#)

In the consumer PR space, the opportunities for women are very good at all levels. In my experience, I've encountered more women in top positions at consumer agencies and leading consumer practices. That's true for our clients heading in-house teams too—most are women.

The base of candidates entering the PR workforce is skewing heavily female. I think it's important to have a healthy mix of young women and young men, as well as ethnic diversity, to ensure a range of perspectives. The PR workforce needs to reflect the diverse audiences we're talking to every day. We are a 20-person boutique—and 17 of our staff are women. One of challenges we've had is to recruit male candidates to ensure a diverse range of

perspective here.

We work very closely with all the schools in Boston to cultivate a pipeline of candidates. It's important for schools to continue to attract male candidates to their programs as well, so we can recruit best candidates—male or female.

My advice for young women:

- **Expose yourself to various positions.** PR is so many things. It's important to expose yourself to a range of experiences as early as you can, and to recognize that there's something to be gained in every position, every setting, even if you're just observing and not "hands-on."
- **Take advantage of agency opportunities.** If you're career-oriented, agencies are great as they offer a clear path for advancement, as well as the opportunity for both entrepreneurs who may want to start their own agency one day and women who want more flexible careers long-term—to work half-time or virtually, for example.
- **Eschew silos.** Be a lifelong student and don't buy into silos. Success comes down to the people you work with and recognizing that there's so much to learn and being open to doing anything and everything. In recruiting right now, number one thing is social media—and the younger candidates have great opportunity there.



**"Learn from Boomer Women"**  
—GG Johnston, CEO and President, [Johnston Wells](#)

The male/female mix in the public relations industry will continue to equalize in the coming years. Online strategy and social media implementation are attracting more men into the profession. Of course, women are drawn to these evolving public relations disciplines, as well. My advice for younger women entering PR:

GG Johnston  
CEO and President  
Johnston Wells

- **Learn from boomers.** As the boomers change their work habits and leave the workplace for retirement, we have some challenges in knowledge transfer and loss of experience that provides wisdom to our work. Gen Xers and millennials would do well to use any opportunities they can find to learn from boomers. There's a unique opportunity to infuse the younger generation's love of technology with the perspective of more experienced generations. The question is—can employers help these unprecedented four generations in the workplace get along well enough to see the value each one brings?
- **Work on work/life balance—it doesn't come easy.** For men and women alike, work/life balance is a critical question. Multi-tasking, something we PR pros are known for, isn't all it's cracked up to be. A balanced approach to life creates brain space for creativity and strategy. As the mother of four children, I know this balance is not easy to accomplish. It doesn't happen by accident and it isn't the same from one week to the next. It takes flexibility on the part of the employee and the employer and a high level of creative problem-solving.
- **Work hard, play hard.** We offer flex schedules to our staff and it takes concerted effort by everyone to make it work. We believe that working hard requires playing hard. We don't live in beautiful Denver, Colorado to spend it all at our computers. My advice to young professionals to find a workplace that fits their needs.
- **Be curious and committed.** Our firm was founded 38 years ago by a young woman with two daughters. Gwin Johnston, my mother, has always encouraged young women to be curious, be committed and to help one another. Those values continue to drive our organization as a fourth generation joins us.



**"Don't Try to Be a Super-Woman"**  
—Kathy Obert, Chairman and CEO, [Edward Howard](#)

I have the unique opportunity to be the Chairman and CEO of the oldest independent public relations agency in the United States, and yes, I was the first female to hold that position here at Edward Howard when so named in 2000.

Kathy Obert  
Chairman and CEO  
Edward Howard

Without making any judgment about whether it's right or wrong, it's easy to observe that the male-female balance "at the top" of the agency business (which remains male-dominant) is not reflective of the balance of professionals throughout the rank and file (which is clearly female-dominant). Having said that, it's important to remember that the skills needed to run a successful business are different than those required to provide great public relations counsel and outstanding client service/account management.

Male or female, some people naturally gravitate toward being "hunters," while others are "farmers." The good news is that agencies have huge needs for both hunters and farmers. In smaller and mid-sized agencies, executive leadership positions frequently also mean equity stakes, which require either the willingness to take a big financial risk by investing in an existing agency with one's personal funds and/or the intestinal fortitude and entrepreneurial gumption to start and grow one's own business.

As women become more comfortable—societally and financially—with being hunters and with taking personal financial risks as owners, we'll see more women at the top. And by the way, our industry needs men *and* women, in both management and client service roles.

Expect that change will come slowly, but it will be more rapid in geographic areas that demonstrate higher tolerance for diversity generally. Expect to see faster parity in on the coasts and in markets like New York, Chicago and Boston, San Francisco. Change will come more slowly in the Midwest and Bible Belt regions. That's not a PR-specific issue, it is a societal issue.

My advice:

- **Don't try to be a "super-woman."** After doing this for 30 years, I've come to a harsh reality. Harsh, because while I was growing up, I always believed that it was possible for us girls to have it all—super-moms who were super-executives, super-wives and super-women in our own right. Today, I believe it is possible to be successful in all, but extremely difficult to be incredibly fabulous at all of them.
- **Nurture a strong support network for yourself.** When the kids come along, you are going to need those grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors and so on. I'll never forget the time I had to drive 60 miles in 45 minutes when a board of directors presentation I was giving was delayed, and interfered with the day I was supposed to be the mom who had to bring in the snack that started with the letter "M" for my son's class (marshmallows and melon). That teacher was NOT impressed with my board presentation!
- **Be willing to ask for help.** Learn from everyone around you. Say please and thank you. And take care of yourself.



### "Support Networks Make a Difference"

—Becky Powell-Schwartz, President and CEO, [The Powell Group](#)

In terms of account directors and people coming up on the agency side, I see a lot of women. These are the neatest women in their late 30s and early 40s who are leaders in their firms. They are going to be our next leaders. My advice to them and to those coming up behind them is this:

Becky Powell-Schwartz  
President and CEO  
The Powell Group

■ **Build a support network.** I have a great support system. I have five "sisters" (close friends) that I call the "Hi-Fivers." Some of us are in the business, and some are not. We create a positive, objective support system for each other.

- **Find firms that offer balance.** What I want to do in a business that is very manic and deadline oriented is to provide my staff with opportunities to help them balance their lives. I did this before there was flexibility in our work environment. So my approach is that we're a team. When you're in a team, you help each other out.
- **Set personal priorities.** Are you leading work—or are you letting work lead you? Ask yourself that, and know when you are out of synch. For me, I work out every morning before I come to work. Sometimes, I'm there at 5:30 a.m. and sometimes 6 a.m. The days get longer, but I still produce. At the end of the day, personal relationships still matter. I heard the CEO of GameStop say recently that he stops every day at 6 p.m. and talks to each one of his kids. If family is a priority to you or the people you work with, honor that and work around it. Today's work culture gives us options and technologies that can help us achieve that sort of balance.



### "Replace Yourself to Move Up"

—Jennifer Graham Clary, Global Chair, Technology Practice; Northern California Market Leader; [Burson Marsteller](#)

In the top ranks, we see women holding more leadership positions than in the past. This is attributable to more enlightened senior management, as well as more candidates that are competent and qualified for senior positions, which is a gratifying development. The least change has occurred at the "C-level" and corporate board levels. Not enough women have succeeded to these more senior positions, but this will continue to improve over time.

Jennifer Graham Clary  
Global Chair,  
Technology Practice  
Northern California  
Market Leader  
Burson Marsteller

It's important to maintain a diverse and well blended gender mix at all levels, and I would expect this to be achievable with continued efforts. My advice:

- **Avoid severe family sacrifice.** It's very important for each individual to make his or her decision about matters affecting the balance between work and family. This profession is extremely demanding and the rewards for success are exceptional, but career decisions need to keep family considerations in mind. This ultimately will result in high achievement over long periods of time—achievement that is not hampered by the stress of family situations that have been neglected and "gone off the rails." We need to foster a work environment that permits women and men to succeed in their careers without the cost associated with severe family sacrifice. In the end, this works out best for the individual, their family, as well as the company.
- **Tout talent over gender.** The basic premise for high output and a well regarded organization is talent. It is not based on gender, but on creativity, winning business and satisfied clients. These characteristics are the basis of success, which any man or woman can use as a guideposts for long term career development and advancement.
- **Adopt a "replace yourself" strategy.** I spent significant time onsite at a client in my early career. The organization encouraged a system of promotion with a "replace yourself" strategy. The result was one of the best run organizations I've had the privilege to work with. It stuck with me. When in conversation about change with talented staff (at any level—in fact, I've done this with interns), the first question I ask is their strategy for replacing themselves. This usually draws a surprised look and then upon further conversation, the acknowledgement and excitement that change can happen. My philosophy and my advice is always to hire someone smarter than you for the relevant need. This has helped in my own advancement.

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