

# Leaning In and Climbing Up: Cheers to Successful Women in PR

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There have been countless studies and think pieces published recently about the number of women in PR and their role in the field. Across the board, public relations is a field dominated by women and they're found at every level in the office – but the numbers dwindle as soon as you hit the top. This can be found from the smallest agencies to the largest corporations. So, we decided it was time to recognize and celebrate the

women who have made it to the top – and gain their insight on how they got there. Together we can recognize and celebrate some of the wonderful and successful women in public relations. Now, more than ever, it's important to find the support, company and resources that will enable a rewarding career. So, we sat with some women who have positively changed the industry and paved their way to success.

Thank you to the following women for their participation: **Kristin Daher**, president and chief storyteller of

**Powerhouse Communications**; **Carmen Marsans**, SVP of client services for **Comunicad**; **Crosby Noricks**, founder and director of **PR Couture**; **MJ Pedone**, president of **Indra Public Relations**; **Marian Salzman**, CEO of **Havas PR**; **Gini Dietrich**, CEO of **Arment Dietrich, Inc.**; and **Krysten Copeland**, founder and chief strategy officer of **KC& Co Communications**.

Top Quotes From Women in Public Relations



"I once had a client tell me I'm impossible because I keep demanding more excellence – and I took that as a compliment – (though I'm not sure she meant it that way). I'm not one to settle and I demand excellence, which is something every single

**Krysten Copeland**, Founder and Chief Strategy Officer of **KC & Co Communications**

**Gini Dietrich**, CEO of **Arment Dietrich, Inc.**

Read or view the video below to get their take on the industry. Their comments have been edited for length and clarity, and each women's response comes after her initials. Let us know what you think!

## What is your favorite career accomplishment thus far?

MP: The one that I like to speak about is my accomplishment of being a female in a male-dominated business. When I started out two decades ago, there were very few females in the sports business. I was/am a female in a male-dominated business and dealt with a lot of roadblocks from my competitors. Fast forward two decades later, and I have thrived! So for me, being an accomplished entrepreneur, is my personal favorite career accomplishment.

KD: The most memorable milestone in my career was taking a leap of faith and starting my own agency, Powerhouse Communications. It's been the biggest challenge and greatest accomplishment in taking on an



ownership role to build a company that both supports the growth of my employees and clients, as well as encompasses a brand culture I believe in.

## What dreams/goals do you hope to achieve in the next five years and how do you stay focused on them?

GD: The vision of Spin Sucks is to change the perception business leaders have of the PR industry. It's pretty gregarious—and we're certainly faced with challenges, such as alternative facts—but we work every day to help communicators learn how to report real business results to their executives or clients. Until we can prove our effectiveness, we won't have a seat at the proverbial strategic table. Our goal is to help every communicator get there through professional development, partnerships, and forward-thinking approaches, such as the way Cision looks at influencer marketing. It's certainly not easy to stay focused on this vision, but everything we do goes to it. We constantly ask ourselves, "Does this help the PR industry move forward?"

KC: In addition to scaling the business and partnering with incredible clients, I also want to position KC & Co Communications to be the agency of the future. The traditional agency model is failing. Larger agencies often silo their teams, which leads to less collaboration, more frustration and higher turnover rates among junior and mid-level team members. As we continue to grow, I'm very cognizant of the type of company culture I'm building and ways to improve it. To stay focused, I break down yearly and quarterly goals into bite-sized, weekly to-do's and write them down at the beginning of each week. It sounds simple, but it makes me more intentional about carving time out to work on them.

## What is your favorite thing about being a woman who has made it into the C-Suite?

CM: Throughout my career, one of the things I have enjoyed the most is the opportunity to create change by empowering the next generation of women leaders. Getting others excited about moving forward to reach executive level positions in any industry motivates and inspires me to stay creative and open to what's to come. The most satisfying aspect of my current position as a senior vice president at the PR agency Comunicad, is the confidence I have to voice my opinion, not be afraid to exercise my creativity, and being able to mentor other talented women who are starting their journey in this business. In most, if not all, industries there is good and bad competition. Good competition helps keep you flexible, nimble and creative. Recognize the difference and never stop learning.

## What is your favorite aspect of being a Lady Boss?

MS: I definitely don't think of myself as a female boss, but rather as the place where the buck stops (to quote the old cliché). Some days the responsibilities definitely weigh heavy, but I derive great pleasure helping others learn to jump off cliffs fearlessly and propose ideas that—before working with me—they might have considered crazy.

CN: My favorite part of boss life is also my least; that ultimately everything that happens, good or bad, is my responsibility. I do enjoy the energy of female-focused business development and community building right now – from conferences like Create & Cultivate to co-working spaces like The Wing. As the former head of the women's center during college, I am heartened by what feels like a greater comfort and adoption of the word feminist. I love the quote by Cheryl Strayed, "You don't have a career, you have a life," and it does feel that for those of us in a position of privilege, there are more choices and support than ever before to create a career that integrates with lives, rather than saying yes to something that is simply a necessary evil to get to the good stuff.

## What is one of the challenges you face in successfully being a woman high up in PR?

GD: Just one?! There are two big challenges I personally face: The first is in business development. Prospects constantly ask me when they get to meet my male partner or tell me they can't negotiate without my male partner



at the table. I don't have a partner, let alone a male one. The second is in speaking. I have had three situations in the past 18 months where I've specifically been asked to speak at a conference, negotiated a fee, and then be passed over because the budget "doesn't allow for the fee." Which is fine—not everyone can afford to pay their speakers. But in all three instances, I've later discovered the speaker ended up being a man, who charges double what I do and was paid expenses to fly in and speak. It's hard to imagine it's for any other reason than I'm a woman, particularly when the reason given was they couldn't afford me.

MS: The biggest challenge for any senior PR leader is recruiting, hiring, training and retaining awesome and diverse talent. PR just isn't the go-to destination for some of the people we want to join our ranks—or rather, the people we *need* in order to make our agencies more agile and savvy. I have a hunch that agencies that have achieved gender balance thrive in ways that mostly female agencies don't. I am committed to doing whatever it takes to attract terrific women, terrific men, terrific candidates of color, people of several generations ... but it isn't easy.

MP: One of the biggest challenges I face is to manage expectations. A client will see the top-tier media hits that I will get for another client and they will want the same. To them, it doesn't matter if the other client is a celebrity or professional athlete and that is why they were on the cover of a magazine or that they were on a late night show. It makes me crazy at times, but I work tirelessly from the first meeting with a new client to be clear about the process and strategy that PR entails, as well as the deliverables they can expect.

CN: My challenges are less about the PR industry and more about the impact of being self-employed and navigating childcare, healthcare, home ownership ... all challenging to navigate. When I think about the PR space, I think the challenge is less about gender and more about operating in the fashion/lifestyle space which just seems to get consistently devalued and dismissed. This was part of my goal in establishing the Bespoke Communication Awards – to help drive awareness and recognition to those who are doing great, smart, strategic and creative work coming out of this trillion dollar industry!

KD: Since my agency specializes in the restaurant industry—a primarily male-dominated field— I am sometimes one of few women sitting at the conference room table, and often the youngest. Having started my career in PR right out of college, then founding my agency at 32, I have been confronted with skepticism from those who doubt that someone my age would have the experience and know-how to run successful national campaigns for large companies. As a woman, some I've encountered have believed that my professional counsel may be limited to understanding the female demographic only – when that is far from the truth.

CM: Today's public relations climate has changed significantly in that the field is tougher and in some cases, has become a bit cynical. PR is not a 9 to 5 job. The demands are even more challenging when it comes to keeping up with the pace of a 24-hour news cycle and the necessity to compete for the attention of multiple audiences across so many more communications channels. As a woman in the upper echelons of PR, the balancing act of my professional and personal life demands more from me and how I choose to be productive. Even after being in the PR field for many years, I still need to set boundaries and make tough choices on how to balance work and family. I make it a priority to schedule an early dinner and personal time with family. At the office, I have learned to effectively delegate tasks and focus on the items that call for my expertise and best support my goals, the agency and client.

KC: I would be remiss to not mention the triple whammy I'm often hit with as a young, African American woman who happens to own her own business. Sometimes, subtle biases and latent sexism slip out (i.e. being called sweetie, or honey during client presentations). However, I have learned to quickly weed out those types of clients prior to even signing a contract. One of the perks of having your own business!

## What advice would you give to women seeking to venture into the upper levels of PR?

GD: So many things! First, I would say take Sheryl Sandberg's advice and lean in. There is no reason on earth you can't go for that promotion or client you really want, just because you *might* get married one day or you *might* have a baby one day. It's not easy to have it all—trust me, I get it. But we have better opportunities today to lean in and get what we want from our professional lives while balancing our personal ones. The second piece of advice is to negotiate. I am always astounded when women don't negotiate—their job package, their raises, their client



contracts. It's not something we do naturally, but there is nothing wrong with asking for what you think you deserve. The worst you'll hear is "not now" and the best you'll hear is "absolutely!" Negotiate everything. And finally, take care of yourself. Our industry is constantly evolving and we have to keep up—or even stay ahead. Invest in professional development. Take online courses. Read lots and lots and lots of blogs and books. Keep yourself sharp.

MS: Figure out what's best for you in terms of balance and don't compromise. I don't think you can put both work and life front and center simultaneously, so you need to manage expectations (starting with your own) and decide how to best delegate what you can outsource without feeling great guilt.

MP: Hone in on your skills in every way possible. The world of PR changes rapidly along with all the new technological ways to communicate with the media and the public. Build trusting relationships and do the best job you can each and every day, while also gaining as much knowledge as you can. Also, having a mentor or two who you can share your achievements, as well as frustrations, with is always a great building block.

CN: Industry-wide, women in PR often find that starting their own agency or choosing a freelance career is preferable to an executive level role within a traditional agency structure. This, coupled with the all-access world we live in, makes creating the life you want more attainable than ever. However, we still have unbalanced gender representation at top levels of leadership within the traditional agency structure. I would encourage women to carefully consider the value of each approach.

KD: Understand that you can't do it all. It's important to invest in the development of the people around you because you are only as strong as your team. Whether that means providing your team with the resources they need to grow professionally or equipping them with the tools to better serve your clients, it's of the utmost importance that you surround yourself with people who have skill sets that complement your own. Also, understand that as women we may have to work even harder to prove our capabilities and that we are the absolute best person for the job. Be up for the challenge — it makes the big wins that much sweeter!

CM: Stay focused on what it is you *really* want to do in your career and be confident about the choices you make to achieve those goals, without compromising your values. At the same time, be sure to hone your skills, expand your knowledge, think outside the box and continue to build your network beyond the status quo. Throughout my professional journey, I focused more on how to reach my goals without feeling intimidated by job titles. Experience has taught me that job titles don't always mean that you are skilled at a job. It is better to keep an open mind, use your life insights, and believe in yourself and your abilities to lead.

KC: I'm sure this is important in other careers as well, but relationship building is everything. Never offend the wrong person but always stick to your morals. Also, as you grow in your career learn how to say "no" when necessary to prevent burn out.

## What mentors have you had/advice have you gotten that have shaped your career?

GD: I have had the great honor to work with so many smart people. The general manager of the FleishmanHillard Kansas City office was a man by the name of Gary Kisner. He really took me under his wing and helped me come out of my introvert shell. I credit much of my success to what he saw in a horribly shy 22-year-old. My boss, Katherine Childress, taught me how to look out for myself, how to ask for what I wanted, and how to create collaboration. After starting my business, I've worked with three coaches who've each significantly helped me in leadership, financials and operations. I'm big on hiring people to help me where I am weak and am always proud when someone tells me how coachable I am. This is something women need to do — it's part of taking care of yourself and investing in your future.

MS: Growing up in this business most of my advisers have been male, so most of their input has related to being fearless, taking risks, asking for forgiveness, not approval, and never turning down work-related travel. Throughout my entire career, I cannot remember ever being too scared or too tired to hop on another red eye—even if the destination was an embattled country, a third world city or a location at the opposite end of the planet. That said, everyone doesn't want to lead that life, and if it doesn't work for you, be proud of yourself for enforcing your limits.



MP: The advice I received early was from my parents who both lead by example and told me to work hard and go the extra mile. More importantly, they instilled in me to never go back on my word and that you have one chance at making a great impression. They also told me that my name would hang on a door someday – so work hard and treat people how you want to be treated.

CN: I discovered through the early success of PR Couture, and the willingness of the press to present my perspective as that of an expert, that it wasn't necessary to wait for approval or external validation to understand that my contribution had value and my commitment appreciated by members of my community.

KD: I am fortunate to have my former boss, Melinda Morgan Kartsonis, as my trusted mentor. Not only did she give me tremendous responsibility early on in my career, she inspired me! Her trust pushed me to perform at my best and take on challenges with confidence. In addition, Melinda taught me the art of networking, and that the key to building meaningful relationships is through personal and thoughtful touches. Her monumental vote of confidence came in 2015 when she presented me with the unique opportunity to purchase her 25-year agency, Morgan Marketing & Public Relations, and transition the firm's clients and employees to my own as Powerhouse Communications. I am beyond lucky to call her my friend and mentor.

CM: I have been the recipient of much encouragement throughout my career, but one of my mentors, Joy Letsinger, opened doors for me. She helped me recognize my skills and abilities by challenging me to step out of my comfort zone. She advanced my accomplishments and achievements to be recognized by others. I learned to have confidence in my ideas and assert myself by giving input and perspective. Joy's support gave me credibility, boosted my confidence, and more importantly, taught me how to become my own advocate. Her mentorship shaped my philosophy to be a positive and grateful employee with empathy for others.

KC: One of the best pieces of advice I have received was to "go hard or go home." It's an incredibly simple concept, but I feel like analysis paralysis often stops people from reaching their full potential. Just because something is an easier choice doesn't mean it's the right one. As I made the transition from freelance consulting to an actual boutique firm, that advice has resurfaced several times and keeps me going.

## **Can you discuss the different strategies that have worked for you as you've forged your career – including insights, experience, and how to advocate for yourself on critical issues (pay equality, career advancement, etc)?**

GD: This is a tough question because, even though it's 2017 and we should be equal, we're not quite there. Everything I've mentioned above is how I've forged my career path. I once had a client tell me I'm impossible because I keep demanding more excellence—and I took that as a compliment (though I'm not sure she meant it that way). I'm not one to settle and I do demand excellence, which is something every single woman can and should do. There is only one person who is going to look out for you...and that is YOU! So look out for yourself. Invest in yourself. Negotiate. Lean in. Work hard, and beat your chest in a humble way. No one will reward you for working hard if they don't know what you're doing. Don't be afraid to show them!

MS: I pick my bosses and have kept most of them as lifelong friends and advisers. I never worry about the small things—like monthly compensation or job title. If I admire and respect someone, it will all work out.

CN: The best job opportunity and most significant pay raise I ever received occurred when I was detached from the outcome. While I certainly know it is easier said than done to head into an interview or negotiation and truly not care about the result, I do believe that my "whatever happens, happens" attitude translated into a casual confidence that was highly effective. Additionally, seeing as though PR Couture teaches courses on defining your personal brand and letting that lead you to opportunities, and the right ones, I am a firm believer in having your brand messaging, aesthetic and direction locked in. Whether it be a brand or a recent graduate looking to land their dream job, the principles we teach in PRISM, a mentorship and industry skills program for those focused on taking control of their dream PR career, have landed some of our grads careers in top-tier fashion and lifestyle publications and agencies.



KD: Both my hard work ethic and proactive nature have been key drivers in the advancement of my career. By thinking creatively and offering ideas and solutions – most times without being asked – I have demonstrated that I’m a valuable member of the team and an asset to my clients. I’ve also seized any opportunity to take on leadership roles. It’s very important to advocate for yourself in the workplace. If you want something, ask for it. But be prepared to present your case using examples. A concern? Outline the effects and offer a resolution. A raise? Prove your value and dedication. More responsibility? Demonstrate your competence and growth goals.

CM: Take leaps of faith, occasional risks to build your career, and learn to be an advocate for yourself. Letting go of fear is crucial, as well as being open to change without compromising values. Having a yes-I-can attitude has been key to my career advancement. When confronted with a challenge, I didn’t allow lack of knowledge or experience to paralyze me. I am inquisitive by nature, so knowing that I could and would succeed propelled me to ask questions, research the subject and build teams to help me move forward. These attributes served me well, especially when it came to addressing workplace issues. Throughout my entire career, hard work and never losing confidence have been my best attributes to opening doors for myself.

KC: This is a tough one because while there are universal principles that will assist with career advancement, they will generally manifest themselves in different ways. Personally, I have found that having steadfast goals but adopting flexible methods to reach them yields dividends. Also, it’s important to find your tribe – a group of individuals that you trust and lean on for support and idea swaps. Having a tribe can keep you motivated, especially as an entrepreneur.

## **How do you see successful change happening in PR – specifically for equality? What challenges remain? Do you have any ideas/ or visions of how they can be overcome?**

GD: Considering a good majority of the top spots in the global PR firms and on in-house communications teams are still men, we have a loooooong way to go. That’s frustrating, particularly in a female-dominated field. But the evolution of our industry, the ability to work virtually, and finally having data to prove our effectiveness is going to help us gain more equality. As you look to gain equality for yourself, look for organizations that support women and tend to be feminist. Look for the organizations that believe in work/life balance and reward productivity versus hours spent. And support one another. We tend to be our own worst enemies. We can’t expect men to support us if we don’t take care of one another. If we can achieve that, we’ll have equality and more!

MS: The challenge for PR is pay. Period. We need to be able to compensate our talent at a level that’s consistent with the quality of the folks we want to hire. We won’t be truly successful until we reward PR people for the contributions they make.

MP: Since I first started in sports PR, women are now much more entrenched in the field than ever before. Today, you see women on the field interviewing the athletes, calling the games, or even collaborating on projects with athletes. There has been a huge uptick in women interested and working in sports entertainment. Unfortunately, I still feel that there are men who don’t see women as talented or knowledgeable when it comes to sports. Women who are pursuing a profession in a male dominated industry, such as sports, need to really focus on gaining knowledge to continue overcoming and making breakthroughs professionally.

CN: There are researchers far more qualified than I am to speak about the current scope of gender-based equality in public relations, but I do believe that the more we can do to foster inclusivity and value diverse sets of voices across the board (which often happens when women are at the helm), the stronger our field becomes in our ability to truly act as strategic advisors.

KD: Successful change is happening in PR as more and more females gain C-Suite roles and lead large-scale marketing efforts for national brands. We must continue to be confident in our abilities, and aggressive, creative and groundbreaking in our work! We are not limited by any stretch of the imagination. We also need to remember to lift each other up, both inside and outside the professional environment. I’m a firm believer that “Empowering Women Empowers Women” and it’s encouraging to see other women succeed.



CM: The PR world continues to evolve at a rapid pace. Unfortunately, there are still discriminatory practices and pay equity issues that women face. We live in a global society that is multicultural and multigenerational. For those of us in positions of power to create change, we must help level the playing field so that more women are represented in the C-Suite, the boardroom, or at the head of the table. I believe that a woman's ability to problem solve, create consensus, and show empathy is a plus in the executive suite. Those of us who can mentor young talent have a responsibility to do so until executives, primarily in male-dominated industries, realize the importance of helping advance talented women to top positions.

KC: According to some reports, women hold over 60 percent of all PR jobs; yet, only 30 percent of all PR agencies are run by women. While I could write an essay regarding the potential reasons why this is the case, I'm pleased with the increased discussions surrounding the empowerment and development of women in leadership positions, especially as it relates to women CEOs and founders within the PR space. I believe that these conversations, workshops and panels will lead to increased opportunities for the current and future generations of women leaders.

Thank you again to these wonderful women for their insight, experience and participation. Cheers to your success, and let us know if you have ever used their advice!