ABSTRACT In light of Sheryl Sandberg’s book, Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead, recent debate has sparked over the choices, obstacles, and opportunities women face in today’s changing workplace. This article sheds light on the current atmosphere for female marketing communications professionals. Four industry women leaders share their insights on how women are influencing and disrupting the traditional marketing landscape.

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Forward by Leslie Zaikis, Director of Brand Engagement at Levo League

It is a wonderful, complicated time for women in business. The conversation around gender and success has skyrocketed to front pages and trending topics on twitter. Women have more opportunities in business than ever before, so why have these opportunities not yet translated into hard numbers of success? Sheryl Sandberg, CFO of Facebook and pioneer of the Lean In movement, emphatically suggests that women are, in fact, holding themselves back. Can women juggle a high-power career with family and personal happiness? Ann-Marie Slaughter’s controversial “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” article in The Atlantic posits that life balance is next to impossible. What are the benefits to working for women leaders in the workplace? These and many other questions are top of mind in today’s dialogue surrounding this issue.

Yet, I am confident that this current debate is not just a trendy flash in the pan. The shift, and the real change, is just beginning. In my work at Levo League, a career community for Gen Y women, we are seeing a generation of young women who are quietly overcoming the stale model of success that is being debated so fiercely in the media today. Women are no longer trailblazers, the only woman in their field; they are part of an overflowing pipeline of future leaders. Women are no longer competing for just one seat at the table; they are sitting side by side on executive boards at companies large and small. Women are no longer just employees; they are owners (of nearly half of all private business in the United States).

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The New World of Marketing Communications

It comes as no surprise that IMC students and graduates are keenly interested in the topic of women in marketing; the 2013 graduating class is predominantly female, contrary to the composition of most other studies and fields of business. Within the highest ranks of leadership, however, the numbers of women haven’t seen as much progress, posing the critical debate: How do women continue to excel and add voice to strategic decision making in today’s marketing context?

Several women marketing leaders were interviewed to gather perspectives on success. From leadership styles to targeting women consumers, the insights shared below shed light on how women can, and are, shaping the marketing communications environment.

Leadership Styles

Walker Barrs, Kratz, Appert, and Fromson separately asserted the same: Women tend to excel in collaborative environments and encourage communication horizontally across teams. Their candid insights on stereotypical female leadership styles demonstrate the advantages to openness in office culture that employees benefit from. These attributes help teams see the big picture across projects and campaigns, boosting morale, building unity and enabling goal-setting to meet objectives—a strength that high levels of communication fosters in marketing departments both large and small.

“Building relationships is the backbone of business and life. Maintaining authenticity and reaching a higher level or personal relationships with people is when magic can happen. This type of relationship building feeds into my management style. Conveying authenticity and that I’m a real person that can and has made mistakes, has led to real partnerships on the teams that I have both worked on and lead. I am a really participative leader, but not a micromanager. I’m in it for the team and believe that one and one can equal three in an environment where people learn from each other and build off each other. I’ve managed my career learning by seeking out people who are smarter than me—I never want to be the smartest person in the room, because then I’m not learning. The caveat to this is that as the leader you have to learn to make the hard calls. And I think that’s difficult for a woman. Every time I’ve had to let someone go, I’ve gone home and cried. And people say it gets easier, well it’s not easy. And the moment it becomes easy, you need to check yourself.”

-Kratz

“I value a lot of open dialogue; I constantly like to talk things through with people. With direct reports, I want them to see the bigger picture and create an environment where they can do their best work. People will do their job better if they can see the larger strategy—and a successful leader enables a team to visualize the end goal. I try to make very clear, within my
team, that you’re not limited to things within your job title, in order to challenge people. On my team the lines are really blurred; we do all of the digital marketing and social media and PR together. Being collaborative makes everyone working as a team feel comfortable which in turn allows leaders to best utilize the teams’ strengths. I always say if you’re capable of something, then do it! I think it’s important to be open to change: I feel like I’m still really constantly working on my leadership style and always trying to be a better manager, and learning a lot about myself along the way. It is challenging to do a good job—and time consuming—and yet it’s all worthwhile. When I think of all of the people who have helped me along the way, I’m motivated to do that for other people. Empowering people to be in charge of things and be successful and grow as a professional makes me feel like a more successful leader in return.”

-Fromson

“My style is more collaborative; I want to understand from the beginning what the team as well as its leaders are expecting from us. I make it a point to go across functions or across business and make sure we have very clear direction and have gotten input from all stakeholders [in order to be successful]. I have been fortunate to see great inspirational leaders—both men and women. Sheryl makes a point that often people don’t realize that women can be both compassionate and successful in their careers. I have seen and experienced women who can be both. What is important is that inspiration is really heartfelt: I have seen leaders give the company line and no one believes it. Authenticity is crucial to successful leadership.”

-Barrs

“People have often told me ‘I forget you are my boss because you’re so easy to talk to and you’re so open to having a discussion.’ This is a good thing and a bad thing depending on the situation but it is definitely a stereotypical female trait. Women tend to be more nurturing, want to make people feel good and do the right thing for everyone. When used in the right setting, like brainstorming, team building or facilitation roles, it can be a huge asset. We do have to get comfortable with not being the peace keeper—in the right situations. This is where we tend to fall down as our careers progress. Make the hard call when you have to—and don’t be afraid of it.”

-Kratz

“I’m one of the youngest leaders in my position currently. I’ve built a lot of credibility through being really open—open to everyone—and being a really good listener. I think it’s really important that you listen before you speak, so that when you speak, others listen. I’ve worked with a number of different styles, [but I always remember to] remain levelheaded, calm, and collected. I never raise my voice, because you don’t make friends that way. If you enter a difficult conversation, I go in with the motive that I’m not going in to get my way, get my point across, I’m going in to build a tighter relationship. So that even if I don’t win my point here, further down the road I’ve got your support with me, and I’ve found it’s worked. I’m always optimistic, even on the toughest days. If you’re given empowerment, room to breathe, and support, and I can offer that to my team, you build a really strong dynamic, where the wind is at the back of your whole team, instead of propelling one leader.”

-Appert

“I have read over and over that women are inherently multi-taskers and, admittedly, I am one! I can remember many situations where I am in the middle of one conversation and am mentally solving a totally different issue. This can be dangerous. Being present in the moment is critical to long-term success. We often get accolades for being able to multitask, but it can also be very detrimental in really understanding the situation at hand. One benefit of being a multi-tasker is that I am able to think about things from all different angles informed by different parts of my life, not just work. This is very different than my husband for example who tends to bucket work and the rest of life into separate buckets that don’t comingle in thought or in timing. My experience is that the multitasker thought process leads to more creative problem solving.”

-Kratz

**Seeking Diverse Perspectives across Teams**

If female MarComm professionals demand collaborative teamwork in order to elicit the best results for their clients and organizations, they seek contributions from the brightest talent. As such, encouraging other women to share new ideas and add to a more heterogeneous team dynamic will only solve one piece of the puzzle. Rather, women must realize the value of diverse perspectives within their teams — to strengthen the idea pool, amplify the creative process, and have a strong and nuanced understanding of the US and global marketplace. The interviewees expressed certain challenges and opportunities for developing robust teams, including female talent, and integrating diverse viewpoints.
“Women are still a minority in the workforce. However, we’ve [begun to see] more women in management and marketing and across B2B, and gender is diverse across a lot of different industries. Women are making really important decisions. In some industries, it [had always been] unique to have a woman there, [which brought] unique insights yet [sometimes] other times they didn’t take women seriously. That’s dissipated over the years; more diversity [is apparent now]. Looking for the right people is an important part of talent acquisition and recruitment and development; there are lots more women in hospitality, marketing, etc.—and that’s a good thing! The world of marketing and communications today is a much more diverse looking group. That tells us that we’re getting more talent across the board. It’s simple math: if you want best the talent in your organization, you’re crazy to not consider any group, no matter what group. As a hiring manager, I look across any group—gender, race, nationality, even across our teams, across different functions to find the best fit. People get stereotyped by their roles—in finance, in research, even from a region of the world—and that’s just as damaging and limiting of a stereotype [as gender]. It is in our best interest to look beyond any boundary.”

-Fromson

There’s such a mix of nationalities and perspectives [in today’s workplace environment], so that age and gender almost become secondary to these as well as [the diverse pool of] attitudes and opinions that this dynamic allows. I feel those can be more difficult to overcome than gender. Sometimes they are rooted in gender, but it’s learning to be open and work with them and develop your own style to navigate through them. It’s important to be really open to similarities as well as extreme differences. This makes you a stronger person, too, in a team environment. You have to come at it head-on and [learn to] approach real differences. A real leader is someone who can take them and make them into something more.”

-Barrs

“I always try to treat everybody respectfully in knowing that everybody’s points of view are valuable. Something [that can be a] pitfall for marketers is when you start only marketing to yourself or assume all consumers are like you. Every voice should have a place at the table because all of those voices are consumers. I’m hesitant to make generalizations because everyone’s experiences can be so different. It can be a slippery slope when you play too much into stereotypes. And in hiring decisions, finding diverse perspectives is imperative, because that is the pivotal opportunity to include new vantage points into the conversation. It is dangerous to want to hire someone very similar to yourself, although it can be easy to do. Then you feel that you know what to expect out of them. I make a point to be sure, no matter who I’m hiring, that they’re the right person for the job. Having a variety of opinions at the table—being around people I can be inspired by—challenges me and helps me be the best version of my professional self. Focusing on this asset makes an organization more robust.”

-Appert

“Targeting Women as Consumers

Recognizing and understanding women, as a diverse segment of a target audience, is critical. Marketers must look past the often-reductive constraints of gender stereotypes. The temptation for female MarComm professionals is to attempt to use personal experience to inform strategy to target women. In order to be effective, however, these interviews stressed the need to understand the nuances of many different segments and psychographic profiles of women today, avoiding stereotypes and “me-marketing” which function around many assumptions rooted in generalizations. Stepping away from “women as consumers” to think of exactly who, what, where, and why to target a subset of the powerful female segment is a skill highly valued in today’s commercial marketplace.

“The marketing to women phenomenon is really, truly fascinating; a ton of evidence exists that shows women are primary decision makers for household purchases. When I first was exposed to Why She Buys by Bridget Brennan, I related to so much of it—how it was about women, why they make the decisions they make, why they’re perceived as more empathetic, how in terms of shopping they tend to not just shop for themselves, but think about others and multitask, too. The stereotypes about women are oftentimes true in certain circumstances, and I do relate and see a lot of myself in them. When I am able to put myself in someone else’s shoes, however, and understand what other women different than myself really need, what other people perceive as valuable, that’s truly good marketing. What people see as a female trait certainly is a trait that anyone can have, but understanding the insight there benefits whatever industry you’re in.”

-Fromson

“I think there are definitely some strengths of being female and speaking to a female consumer, but you also have to be really careful. Our consumer is a mother, and we have specific demographic and attitudinal profiles—really traditional values, family first mindset, wants to save without making sacrifices for her family. I can evaluate the work based on my experience as
a woman, but I think I’d be off there because I’m not our target. What you’ll find is a lot of people will project themselves in the work they’re creating, and I stop myself there. But what I will try to do is find people on the team who fit our target and ask them, [pick their brains for insights], but I try not to project my opinions onto it. I think I can relate to a lot, but I’m careful not to force it.”

-Appert

“I’m a data-driven person. I try not to do a lot of ‘me-marketing.’ I am potentially one sliver of the target market, and a relatively small sliver when I think: ‘I’m Indian, I’m female, I’m an executive, I live in Illinois, I have an income of X, I have two children.’ I think we need to be careful not be ‘me-marketers’ but focus on what the data tells us about our customers. It’s natural to start out modeling the female consumer based on oneself, but you have to be very cognizant to market based on your core target audience and their demographics and psychographics. Before it was Mad Men-like, traditional creative & advertising, but now it’s the data-driven strategic marketing. I can’t emphasize that enough to people entering the marketing workforce and even more so from the Marketing Communications world. You have to get comfortable extracting and translating data about your consumers to inform your decision making.”

-Kratz

Work/Life Balance

Then comes the highly controversial subject for female professionals: Can we have it all? Many sensitivities and considerations are factored into this subject, and the debate is far from over. Most strongly voiced out of the interviews was the notion that indeed these life decisions are part of choice—the choice afforded to all working individuals as they consider the thresholds and, boundaries of their careers, in conjunction with personal and professional and aspirations. Envisioning one’s career trajectory from an early time and letting it evolve and take shape is one way to combat the hesitations that often accompany a woman’s career moves. Finally, avoiding personal comparisons and taking risks helps to give validation to the choices women make.

“It’s all about making choices, we can’t have it all. Like any other working mom, I felt guilty being at work and at home. In order to survive, you have to develop a keen sense of what choices you’re willing to make; between work and family and within careers, how much you’re willing to travel, with a family or not, all of these decisions are about making tradeoffs. The key here is understanding that we do have choices and we own those choices. Some of them are ones that don’t appear to be choices; sometimes we need to push the envelope a little bit and find out are there choices? Whether to be at work early or stay late, or taking a job that stretches you in ways you didn’t expect or not taking a job—those are things we all face. The sooner we dispel the myth that we can have it all the better off we will be.”

-Barrs

“I never use the term work/life balance, I call it LIFE balance. Work happens during life hours and life happens during work hours. It’s harder and harder to separate the two, especially with the advent of technology and connectivity; there is always a conversation going on. A leader’s ability to flex to the situation is important: for some people, their best time is 3 in the morning and for some it is during traditional work hours. If you create a culture of where there is flexibility, you instill trust and with trust comes productivity and better results. This is a highly debated topic in the media right now but is an issue each individual leader and team needs to address. The lines are going to get even more blurred between what’s work and what’s home time. My thought is as long as the work gets done well, on time and on budget, I am less concerned with where and at what time of the day it gets done. But that is a leadership style that really requires you to invest in building trust in your organization. My experience is when you build that kind of trust, without even asking, you get more out of people. They perform at higher levels, they are more dedicated, more flexible, more collaborative, more engaged: because you’re relating to them on their terms. The onus is on the leader to create a culture of accountability.”

-Kratz

“It’s all about choices and defining what it all means. If women can’t have it all...what is all for you? Work isn’t about life. Life is what happens inside and outside the office. It’s defining what that means to you. Obviously work is a large part of it for me, but it may be more so now than it will be five years from now. It’s also about finding boundaries that are healthy. Healthy as far as [setting a] schedule...and for Sheryl Sandberg that’s working smarter, and I think part of working smarter also means saying no, and that’s bold. If you keep saying yes and taking more on, you can deteriorate yourself and lose what that all is, and that doesn’t necessarily elevate you in the workplace. I respect teams who can balance a really healthy lifestyle and I support that.”

-Appert
“Social media makes distinctions between the choices women make so blatantly obvious. I wonder how that affects men and women differently. Our parents’ generation didn’t really find out what other people were doing; for us, we see such a wide range of people in the same stage doing similar things, and then others who are so different, juxtaposed continually on our newsfeeds. It’s a completely different world and set of expectations when you have that information at your fingertips. Especially as women, we tend to compare ourselves a lot to our peers and to other people in our age group. As professional women, we need to stop doing that, and sometimes that means shutting off the computer and living our own lives free from that mirror against the decisions of others.”

-Fromson

**Career Building: Negotiating, Telling Your Brand Story, Asserting Know-How**

Women must self-promote and navigate the corporate environment to develop their careers. Sheryl Sandberg discusses this at length and urges women to “sit at the table,” applauding women for understanding the power and expertise they possess. If women plan to lead, they must demonstrate their value in addition to the products and services of which they market. Women MarComm professionals must sell their story, voice opinions, and not be afraid to know what they’re looking for.

“You can’t be afraid to talk about yourself or your successes. You have to get over [that fear] and be willing to do that. [After all], who else is going to tell hiring managers these things? You need to be articulate about your successes and your particular roles in those successes, to get a position! The more concise and clear and accurate a description, the better picture you’ll be creating of yourself.”

-Barrs

“The agency setting is so female dominated, so I never really felt limited as a woman. When working for the client, I end up working with a lot more men, but gender isn’t really something I think about very much. Any limitations I’ve encountered—actual or perceived—are more related to hierarchy. Roles can be very clearly defined within a title sometimes and you move up at a certain pace and you’re expected to do things at a certain time with a specified structure and timeline. I see that as a potential limitation or glass ceiling so to speak. It’s important for women entering the workforce to understand these distinctions in order to consciously navigate their own success within these parameters.”

-Fromson

“The way we read job descriptions varies by gender. If there are ten things listed for job requirements, a woman reads: ‘Check, check, check…Oh a few things I can’t do? I won’t apply for this, shoot.’ Men emphasize the things they can do; women tend to focus on things they can’t do. Women are very uncomfortable about being confident about what they know and figuring the rest out along the way. It’s unusual to find someone who meets every single one of the job requirements in today’s hiring process: if you feel the job is interesting to you and you can meet the critical mass [of expectations], you might be a good fit—don’t be afraid to go for it.”

-Barrs

“There are certainly advantages of being a woman in the workplace. Personally, I’ve experienced environments and decision-making scenarios in which I can be perceived to be at a disadvantage – the only female and much younger participant amongst a salt-and-pepper hair, suit-and-tie wearing crowd. I love the unsuspecting surprise in this game – the difficulty of trying coming in and continually trying to prove yourself against an audience which may appear to have closed ears. Remember, if you’re invited, you have a reason to speak up. When you finally can cut through in a meaningful way, it’s a big deal. To see the other side trust you, seek you out and say, “I want your insight, I want your expertise” – having them understand you have a lot to offer, to see the tides turn [that’s pretty powerful]. You gain a lot of credit from your peers. And it’s not easy, it takes a lot of persistence, a lot of patience; you can’t lose your cool. I think when you lose your cool and become flustered in situations where being a woman can influence your role, you [make it more difficult] for all of us.”

-Appert

“Often I get asked, ‘Did you know what you wanted to do, did you have a plan?’ I’m a planner by nature and I like to think I had a grand plan for my career - But I didn’t. Knowing where I wanted to end up was really about the only thing I knew and I had no real sense for what the journey was going to be like or how to prepare for it. For me, it is about seeking opportunities, learning new things, being open to possibilities and simply jumping in with both feet and being willing to figure it out along the way. Being ready is more about risk tolerance levels than feeling like you have to be 100% ready to jump in. That’s something that resonated with me in Lean In; women feel they have to have every skill that’s required for the work. If you have every skill, you’re over qualified. You should be going into new roles where you feel slightly uncomfortable. That discomfort is what’s going to stretch you, make you learn and prepare you for the next stretch role. Women say, ‘But I don’t know if I
Leading the Charge

The voice of women is just one narrative necessary for a successful and holistic approach to marketing communications today. Indeed, the ways in which businesses incorporate and facilitate the promotion of women leaders will contribute to the richness of the business world. Having women at the executive table is one way to facilitate these evolving dialogues; engaging female employees and new recruits is equally important. And, the MarComm space is leading the charge by continuing to encourage new thought leaders and develop diverse talent pools. Without question, candid conversations about the role of women in business must continue to be had; women will no longer fight for a seat at the table, rather, they will sit side-by-side.

about the CONTRIBUTORS

LESLEY ZAIKIS
Leslie is a business development and marketing consultant, an expert on generational diversity and an advocate for women in leadership. She most recently served as the Director of Brand Engagement for Levo League, a community of young professionals, role models, and innovative companies enabling Gen Y women to build amazing careers. In her role, Leslie led the sales team and managed relationships with company partners. She also launched and hosted a live video broadcast, called Office Hours, featuring exclusive interviews of top career experts and leaders. Highlighted guests to the show include Kate White, former Editor-in-Chief of Cosmopolitan; Kelly Cutrone, CEO and Founder of People’s Revolution; and Sallie Krawcheck, former Bank of America Executive and Owner of 85 Broads.

Before joining the Levo team, Leslie worked as a management consultant at PricewaterhouseCoopers, where she specialized in human capital and organization culture. At the firm, she published thought leadership articles related to generational diversity and workplace flexibility.

Leslie graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Michigan, where she served as her college student body president, with a dual concentration in Organizational Studies and Political Science.

MEETA KRATZ
Meeta holds the position of Vice President of Marketing at Labelmaster, a leading manufacturer & distributor of dangerous goods/hazardous materials regulatory compliance and safety products, services and software solutions that serves businesses across industry segments globally. Her responsibilities include product management, strategic marketing, marketing communications, corporate branding and ecommerce.

Prior to Labelmaster, Meeta held a number of leadership positions at W.W. Grainger, an $8.5 billion global distributor of facilities maintenance products and services that operates. Most recently she served as the Senior Director responsible for leading the rationalization and growth of a number of underperforming businesses.

Between 2001 and 2004 Meeta held positions as an Associate Product Manager with Kansas City Mo-based Hallmark Cards and as the founder and owner of The Art of Paper, dealing in handmade paper products.

Meeta began her career as a Marketing and Operations Trainee at General Motors Corporation followed by the position of Portfolio Manager in the Global Finance Division of IBM Corporation.

Meeta earned an MBA with a specialization in Entrepreneurship and Marketing from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and a BS degree in Marketing and Operations from Kettering University (Formerly GMI Engineering and Management Inst.), Flint, MI.

RENEE APPERT
Renée transforms creative vision into meaningful customer action. An executive with a decade of award-winning success, Renée has pioneered leadership roles in integrated marketing, crafting stories across brand, retail and media boundaries to change human behavior.
Renée is currently Director of Brand Development for Meijer, a multi-channel retailer ranking among the 15 largest privately held companies in the US. Renée has excelled progressive roles including Director of Marketing for Meijer's e-commerce business, global marketing for The ONE Campaign (Bono’s advocacy organization to end global poverty), and leadership of brand and digital marketing at Whirlpool Corporation. She has similarly lead marketing programs with retailers including Home Depot, Lowes and Sears.

Renée shines when she is building strategic brand and retail marketing programs and orchestrating multi-million dollar media campaigns to create change, and teaching others to do the same. Renée has spoken to global audiences on marketing precision, including The U.S. State Department, and was recognized in 2013 as “Who’s Who” in Digital Shopper Marketing. Renée holds a master’s degree from Northwestern University and also smiles when she’s holding her two unique little dogs, running marathons and enjoying craft beer.

**AMY WALKER BARRS**

Amy is a Global Marketing Leader. Currently she is the Executive in Residence at Emory University’s Goizueta Business School where she is bringing B2B to life and connecting B2B Companies in the SE to the students and resources at Emory.

Previously she held various Marketing Leadership roles for Kimberly-Clark Professional where she introduced innovative marketing concepts in the areas of Branding, Market Research, Sustainability and Marketing Communications. Amy is an experienced Marketer having held numerous positions in Product, Segment and Channel Marketing. In addition she led the industry communications team for a large company merger, the start –up of what is still one of the lowest cost plants in the company, and the divestiture of a business that was considered non-strategic to the organization. Amy has been recognized for her dedication to a customer-driven marketing philosophy and her development of innovative marketing campaigns.

Prior to joining Kimberly-Clark, Amy obtained her M.B.A. from Emory University’s Goizueta Business School in Atlanta and her BA in French from Hollins College in Virginia. She pioneered the “Living Case” concept and intern programs with Kimberly-Clark and Goizueta and continues to serve as a judge for the annual Goizueta Marketing Strategy Competition.

Amy and her husband have two daughters and live in Atlanta.

**SARAH FROMSON**

Sarah is the social media and digital marketing manager for the Kmart Apparel business unit at Sears Holdings Corporation. She is responsible for driving brand consideration and engagement through kmart.com, email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and shopyourway.com across the Kmart Apparel business for categories including women’s, men’s and juniors’ apparel and accessories. As part of her role, Sarah oversees the Kmart Fashion and Stylesip social communities focusing on women ages 18-34 and juniors ages 13-17, respectively. Key brands include Sofia by Sofia Vergara, Route 66, Bongo and Dream Out Loud by Selena Gomez.

Sarah previously worked at Ketchum Public Relations supporting clients in the health and wellness division including Kellogg Company, Aetna and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals. Sarah is a graduate of Northwestern University where she received a master’s degree in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC). She holds a BA from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Journalism & Mass Communication with a focus on Advertising.