

'A painful gift'

Following sexual harassment allegations that rocked its C-suite, The Martin Agency named Kristen Cavallo ('91) CEO just as the #MeToo movement was gaining cultural momentum late last year. Cavallo said in a statement issued at the time, "This is an important moment. They are talking about us, but soon I hope they are rooting for us."

BY ANDY PERRINE ('86)



With marquee names on its client roster including GEICO, Hanes, Oreo, TIAA and others, The Martin Agency has been a force for years in the quixotic world of advertising. Founded as Martin & Woltz in Richmond, Virginia, in 1965 and renamed The Martin Agency 10 years later, *Adweek* magazine named it “Agency of the Year” in 2010. Some of its creative work is iconic, including the GEICO caveman and gecko, and it coined the tourism slogan “Virginia is for Lovers.” Still, it has not been immune from some of the challenges facing the advertising industry overall. While total spending on advertising is up, changing trends in consumer behavior and the emergence of digital and mobile has shaken traditional media and the advertising business along with it.

So it was especially worrisome to its parent company, Interpublic, when the agency’s chief creative officer became embroiled in sexual misconduct allegations at the same time major media was teeming with reports of women coming forward to say they’d been assaulted by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, triggering the #MeToo movement.

At the time, Cavallo was chief strategy and growth officer at MullenLowe, another Interpublic company. She was named CEO of The Martin Agency simultaneously with departures of the CCO and CEO (who was not accused of wrongdoing) amidst the scandal. Cavallo said at the time, “To be the first female CEO of this agency, in this year, under these circumstances—the weight of this isn’t lost on me. It’s going to be hard, but we can do hard things.” She continued, “As a strategist, I love opportunities for transformation, and feel fortunate to play a part, with the full support of Interpublic and its leadership, to help rewrite the ending of this chapter. Obviously, there is a need for a new direction, and the culture has to evolve.”

Because The Martin Agency is in the business of advising clients on how to successfully “brand” their products and services, its approach to repairing its own damaged brand ought to be on point. That’s why Cavallo, months into her tenure at the agency’s helm, called the scandal leading to her becoming CEO “a painful gift.”

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She says, “There’s a ton of research out today showing that the most talked-about brands in the world grow disproportionately. They beat their competitors.” Of course, this might seem like a counterintuitive strategy for a brand being talked about because of negative publicity generated by sexual misconduct allegations.

But after several months on the job, Cavallo says, “One school of thought might have been to get out of the press as soon as possible, to lie low and stay out of the fray and just resurface six months after the crisis. But my instinct was, in fact, to do the opposite, which was to stay in the press, change the narrative and change the conversation so that people would be rooting for us and aligning with us and not against



CEO Kristen Cavallo may be the most visible JMU alum working for The Martin Agency, but she’s certainly not the only one. In fact, the Richmond office has 16 Dukes working in just about every department. And it’s no mere coincidence. “I have consistently hired people from JMU and, I’m not exaggerating when I say this, they almost always turn out to be the total rock stars of the company,” Cavallo says. “They are great writers, in particular. They have a strong sense of presence. They present themselves well, they’re persuasive, they are full of energy and they are often the people that other people want to work around and want to work with because they’re good collaborators and team players.”

(L-R) Ben Surber ('12), Matt Cavallo ('19), Britt Flippo ('13), Tracy Berry ('97), Colleen Hopkins ('05), Kristen Cavallo ('91), Ken Marcus ('93), Allie Waller ('15), Katie Lynne ('13), Whitney Boggs ('09) and Justin Ihara ('06).

us.” If retaining clients and attracting new ones is any measure of whether people are rooting, Cavallo’s approach worked: The Martin Agency didn’t lose a single client as a result of the crisis, and it has landed several new ones since she took the reins.

Cavallo’s play to keep the agency in the press and put the scandal to use is an intriguing one. “We believe attention is a force multiplier, meaning if we can bring attention to the right causes, and for brands that stand for causes, and have a point of view beyond the product that they make, the sales tend to correspond very positively, very favorably.”

So, one might wonder whether Interpublic’s choice of Cavallo as CEO was noble in the context of #MeToo, or just canny. “If I’m being fully honest, I think a big part of why I got the job was because I’m a woman who lived in Richmond at the right time. I think I’m qualified for the job. But I wasn’t searching for it. I wasn’t interviewing for it. I loved my other job and had a lot of opportunity there. My goal now is to make sure that I show that I’m not going to keep this job because I’m a woman who lived in Richmond.”