

Thought Leader Spotlight

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As part of The Azara Group's monthly newsletter, we select a business leader to share insights about leadership, being an influencer, and career development. Our objective is to help support your ability to flourish as a leader and share what makes people thrive in business.

Gwenna Gainer Lucas

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Co-Founder, Coral IQ

Education: Northwestern Univ. (B.S. in Communications Studies)

Previously With: Carter's, Inc.
Nike, Inc. (Cole Haan)
Kate Spade & Company
Liz Claiborne, Inc.
J. Crew Group, Inc.
Macy's, Inc.
Kenneth Cole Productions, Inc.

Interesting Details: "Citizen of the world" who gets her best ideas when surfing; lived in Costa Rica, New York, and Atlanta; expert in brand design and international expansion; mentored over 30 brands as a brand and marketing mentor for incubators like Entrepreneur's Round Table Accelerator in New York City; grew up in central Florida; lives in NYC and Florida where she can serve global clients and expand her business ventures while surfing.



1. What attracted you to your chosen field and profession?

I am creative at heart, but I'm not the stereotypical business person who bases decisions on emotions. I have a very logical mind that creates solutions and products alongside a series of methodical steps in solving problems. For me, doing strategy consulting was a natural choice since there is a constant need for change. Organizations have to respond and adapt to both internal and external changes. I like helping them strategically prepare for this. My work forces me to continually think "outside of the box," and pushes my creativity and innovative thinking. What really excites me is relaying what clients and businesses need to do in order to remain relevant and able to adapt to shifting customer demands and desires in a logical manner. I enjoy advising companies – both large and small – about their strategy in ways that can be realistically executed by a team or company.

2. What person, opportunity, or game-changing moment had the biggest impact on your career?

My "game changer" came my freshman year of college when I decided not to pursue a pre-med degree. Since childhood and up to that point, I had focused on medicine. However, while sitting in my Chemistry 101 class, I got a sinking feeling in my gut that medicine wasn't for me. After being terrified to broach that conversation with my parents who had sacrificed so much to send me to a top-tier school, my mother told me that I needed to be happy with my own life and to follow my heart. That was the first time I became aware of how intuitive we all are when it comes decision making.

Over the years, I've learned to listen more to instinct and justly weigh it against the visible facts. This skill has positioned me and my firm for huge opportunities and a few missteps. Nevertheless, I encourage my team of consultants to actively practice this skill when supporting clients.

3. What is the biggest challenge you faced professionally? How did you overcome it?

The biggest challenge that I've faced happened fairly recently. I had to actively learn that you cannot effectively take care of your business and other people if you haven't first taken care of yourself. What we have to give has to come out of our abundance. Two years ago, I would have thought that was selfish. But what I've come to learn and embrace is that we have to practice "self-care" to have the mental space to creatively solve problems as business leaders. We also have to have the capacity to listen intuitively to our clients' needs without distraction. This can only happen if we create enough resources within ourselves from which we can pull. Now, I make sure that I have a defined work time. I meditate and pray each day. And, I actively use the word "no" so I can be my best self both professionally and personally.

4. What tools or tactics do you rely on in being a more effective leader and team member?

For me, it boils down to listening. It is an art and a skill that most of us don't do extremely well. Recently, my team and I implemented the "10-second rule." When in conversation, we don't begin talking until 10 seconds after the person speaking finishes. I was amazed at how much people and clients divulge in that little pause that feels like an eternity. Moreover, when vetting clients, it is usually after that pregnant pause that they share what the real issues with their business are and the true catalysts behind those challenges.

5. Share a story about an interesting or difficult negotiation and how you were able to gain more influence and leverage as a result.

I believe negotiation is all about knowing your audience and what is important to them. Recently, my company, TRG, pitched a young brand that had extremely aggressive goals to expand to as many international markets as possible. Those of us who have experience in international markets understand that there are so many factors that come into play that can catapult or demolish expansion plans in just one market. Knowing this, I knew that TRG would be able to not only position itself as a partner to develop the action plan, but could also serve as a trusted advisor to help manage the leadership team's expectations to prevent surprises and frustrations during market-launch execution.

As a result, that team was able to proactively modify the strategy presented to its board, and received a larger capital investment due to the confidence it gained in the plan since they were positioned to actually execute with our support. When you negotiate and understand what motivates them and what their fears are, you can speak to this to not only secure business, but to build lasting client relationships where you can guide and influence them to make better decisions.

6. What do you see as your unique value proposition and how has your personal background prepared you to excel?

I've learned that when you are actively creating a competitive edge in business, there must be a distinct presence of a differentiator that no other entity can replicate. Being that TRG is a female-led organization with a culturally and professionally diverse pool of consultants, I truly believe we are able to maximize opportunities with our clients in a non-traditional and multi-faceted way. Most of the companies we've engaged with have typically defaulted to the larger, well-known firms like BCG, Deloitte, and McKinsey.

Once they've engaged with TRG, they realize that some of the solutions offered are "cookie-cutter" template solutions and provide the same perspective that have already been done. While there is absolute credibility in the methods of these firms, the global industry regenerates a new playing field every day as technology allows new players to grab market share in the blink of an eye. Companies that still ascribe to "traditional" ways of building a global brand presence will soon find, if they haven't already, that engaging the thought leadership of unconventional resources is what will enable them to keep and propel them towards expanding their competitive edge.

7. What is your proudest achievement?

Honestly, it is that I learned how to surf. The ocean and her fickle ways have absolutely prepared me for the vicissitudes of owning my own business. You have to constantly stay vigilant for upcoming opportunities, position yourself accordingly, and be patient enough to allow the momentum to take you exactly where you want to go. There are a lot of metaphors with business that replicate in the ocean. Learning to tackle surfing makes me a better businesswoman.