

Welcome to practical ideas for Growth Podcast series, the non traditional contributions to marketing. I'm Sarah Dobeck and I'm thrilled to have Jennifer Cantero joining me today for this conversation. Jennifer is the director of ESG for Sensiba Center for Sustainability. Welcome back, Jennifer.

Thank you, Sarah. It's great to be back.

Awesome. You've been on our podcast before and we are super excited to have you back. And you talked a lot about ESG and I know that I cannot say your full firm name without butchering part of it, even though we practiced. But what we're talking about today is non traditional contributions from marketing professionals. We often put marketing. And kind of this bucket, right. You know your. You know you're here to. Sometimes we hear make it look pretty or you're here to do marketing communications and not to undervalue any of those things because I am a marketer by trading and we do marketing for a living. But it there's a lot more. That we believe. Professionals can be offering to their firms outside of this, and we see examples of this all over the place and you are one of those examples and so. We want to hear more from you. About that, it's. Not often that we see somebody that is leading the practice area that started in marketing. So maybe you can start by sharing your journey a little bit in how you got to be the director for, since the Center for sustainability and like what that really means. It's not a common title to most of us.

No, it's thank you. It is a bit of a journey and a bit of a story, you know, for the past I've been with sense of a sample of both for 11 years, the first ten of those years, I was the head of Mark. Thing and did all of the things that would go along with the head of marketing from, you know, being a sole marketer to having a team of seven over that over that time and. I love marketing. I've been a marketer for 25 years. It is, it is, something is near and dear to me. And yes, it is vitally important and gets, you know, looked down on unfortunately by a lot. But I think firms and partners are starting to see the value a lot more after. COVID for sure that that we really do bring some value as marketers to the team. In 2017, I had the opportunity to start a process for my firm called B Corp certification and I really fell in love with the process and at the end of that, once we finally were certified, my managing partner approached me. And said I would really like you to consider. Partner and becoming partner and all the things you know and and over these next few years doing things to put you on that track. And and I I kind of looked at him and I said, you know, John John sense about our managing partner just said John, you realize I'm not. A CPA, right? And he goes, yes, he goes. I think it's time for us to have folks other than accountants in our partner group. In the state of California, as long as we have at least 51% of certified CPA's, we can maintain our partnership. So that leaves 49% to be taken by non traditional accounting roles and and when he and I. First started to talk, he said, you know. To become partner, you need to be revenue generated and so you really need to to start thinking about building a practice and he and I in the very beginning thought about, you know, marketing services as I've been doing marketing for 25 years. But I had also been doing marketing for 25 years. Fair enough. And so I'm sitting there trying to put together a business plan and outlining services. My heart just wasn't in it. And I said, you know why? Why am I struggling with? This and and at the same time. I I had the big court. Paperwork on my desk. And I looked down at that and I was like, you know. I really loved that I loved everything that went into that. And we had talked about how all of our clients needed to go through that process. And so I approached John and I said, John, I said instead of marketing services, which a lot of firms have a lot of marketers have branched out and start serving clients with marketing services, which is amazing. Our clients need it. But I said, what if I did B Corp consulting for our clients and he said that is amazing. I love that idea run. And step back and gave me the room to start working on building AB Corp certification practice. He

went and. Told the partners that week that that's what I was going to be doing and one of the other audit partners came up to me and said, hey, I hear you're starting a big court practice. There's this FSA certification that I've been looking at and FSA is certified to be able to do sasb reporting, which is the sustainability accounting framework. And he said let's build a practice together. And I was a little taken back at first because I was like, wow, a partner wants. To build a practice with me. Right, like that. That was kind of. It was a little bit of a, a surreal moment. And so, you know, I pulled together a business plan for it with just the, you know, the B Corp and the Sasb service and we presented it to the partners, the partners. Object and then that partner who was going to be my sassy partner, ended up getting pulled into busy season and he's also instructor at a college. And so school started back up. And so I basically plugged away and started building the practice kind. Of on my own. Using all of the skills that I had. As my marketing background. And at the same time, I'm still running the marketing department, so kind of wearing the two hats and I'm also working on the sustainability for the firm and after, after a little while, I went and sat in my Managing Partners office. We're having a one-on-one and it was the end of the day and he had one more. And so we were talking. Briefly, before his next meeting and I said, you know, I could. Really see this? Practice being more holistic and he says, you know, what do you mean, Jennifer. And so I went down this rabbit hole of, like, look, you do this and do this and all these sorts of things. And he goes, what? What you're describing is not just a a. Practice or a niche, but a center of. And he goes, what if we did a sensibus Center for sustainability and you, you flush that out. And I was like, OK. And he picked his stuff up to go to the next meeting. He goes OK, great. Go build that Jennifer and. Walks out of the room. So I immediately went back to my desk and scribbled everything down. I just said because I was like, oh, great. What did I just get myself into? And that was. That was early 2018. And so I slowly started to build, build out my own skill set, look for partners that I could partner with for other services. You know, building relationships once again, using all my skills that I had as a marketer and. Built probably one of the holistic. ESG sustainability practices, one of the first in. In the nation and doing not just the compliance and the you know SAS testation but also doing the strategy and the implementation and the budgeting and the articulation piece that's so important and it's kind of blossomed from there and really taken off. Because of this, I have been on kind of. Speaking tour, if you will. So many different places talking about how sustainability SG really does belong in the accounting world. So that's kind of the story. Of how it evolved and and. We launched in September 2020 and haven't looked back and now I've got a team of seven in my sustainability practice.

As someone who has built a business, I know how hard it is to get to that point, and I think you know, it's. I want to touch on something that you said because I think it's really important. I had one of those managing partners in my future, hence the reason I'm sitting here with the Business Today, who basically did the same thing. Like throughout the idea, I said, what if? And they said sure. Right. And they said go explore it and I think that's a. It's definitely we talked about the growth mindset a lot here, right? But it's a leadership trade and you have to really be willing to, like, let your people explore some things. But the other thing that I think you did that's really important, we get questions about this all the time is you you very directly said we put. A business plan. Right. Because it wasn't just a like. Hey, I kind of feel like doing this. I'm going to have commit. It's like here's what we need to do to make this successful. Here is we we put a vision together. That's effectively what your business plan is with backing and financial soundness behind that. Like what are we really getting ourselves into to do this? And so I, I love that you did that and you know, one of the things. That we hear a lot from marketing and professionals. Is how did you. How did you get to the point where your managing partner could look at you and go? Yes, I know some of this is mindset on the partner side, but there's a lot of trust that had to have been

built in. You know that previous ten year before that moment where they said what if right to build that and I think that's that's something that a lot of our professionals. Come back to every day that just. Like, how do I do that? How do I build that? How do I? How do we earn that? Right. That's at the table because that's really what it was to even ask. You had to have that seat at the table.

Yeah. No, and it it does take time. You know, when I came into the firm, we were, you know, I think 15 million and 85 employees and now we are going to be closing probably close to 61 million and have 350 employees. So there's been a lot of growth in those those 1011 years. And I think the partners recognize that they could not have grown had it not been for the marketing efforts for, you know, putting together a website that doesn't just sit there and look pretty. That actually works for them and brings in leaves and a lot of it is. Building personal relationships with all of the partners and really putting forth efforts to help them succeed. And letting them see that. You have a specialty and that you can help them succeed, which is going to help the firm succeed and then telling your own story. I know many marketers they like to be the, you know, the wizard behind the curtain and never take the spotlight themselves. But there's certain opportunities where you can take the spotlight. And really talk about what you did. To help the firm reach that bottom line and you know, take those moments to tell those stories because it is so valuable to stand up there and say here is how I have contributed to the bottom line. And make sure to keep those stats handy so that when you do get those opportunities because they come up and you won't know until an hour before the meeting, you don't want to be scrambling. So always keep kind of a, you know, a scorecard for yourself. That one you can present to your direct you know your managing partner, whoever you directly report to just so that you can really build confidence with them so that they can then go back to the partner group and and have confidence in saying no this person really knows what they're doing. I got out there and was contributing to the industry. You know, I got out there and was publishing articles and not just in marketing publications. I was publishing in the accounting publications I was putting myself out there as somebody who knew their stuff and was an expert in their own right. And that really helped build reputation with. My partners and just showing them that you are professional, that you demand your worth. Right. And, you know, can back it up. That is where you're going to get a lot of respect and not just go into their office. And when you leave, they have a bunch of to DOS that you're actually helping them succeed and you're you're helping them take on some of that work and being a partner with them and that you have. The firm as a. And you're thinking like you're thinking like an owner already? That's probably one of the most important things that they see that you are thinking like an owner and that you are being wise with your budget being wise with your money, which is their money. You know that that you are, you know, thinking about those. Things you'll get a lot more respect and you'll start to get brought in on conversations like M&A transactions. They'll bring you in a lot earlier on those conversations, they'll start bringing you into the planning sessions that they have as a partner group. You know, once, once you and and don't be afraid to ask to sit in those sessions. Asked to be a part of M&A transactions, asked to be a part of, you know, the seat at the table because a lot of folks, they just wait. To be asked. Instead of taking that initiative to go, I really want to be a part of these conversations and here's why. Here's the value I will bring to those conversations.

I love that. I think that's so important. We don't ask enough. I think we're afraid I. Think you're afraid of the answer. You're afraid to fight the battle, right? And so much of helping marketing play a strategic role in an accounting firm or any professional services. Business for that matter, is all about helping to educate how it can be used. Most of them didn't go to school for marketing. You'll get the rare person

that's. Like, yeah, I I, you know, minored in sales, right? And it's it's definitely an exception. Right. And so I think helping them understand that there is more to offer, there's more to marketing than just promotion, right? And that's the bucket that we put people in. And so I I love. That you know. Any success that someone has comes with a. Whole boatload of. What were some of the roadblocks that you ran into as you were making this transition?

Oh my goodness, because I was wearing so many hats. There was not enough time in the day to get everything done. I had I I really suffered from burnout for a long time because I was working on an average 10 hours a day minimum. You know, there's a lot of 1416 hour days. And you know that that's not just a busy season, that's all year round, which many marketers are familiar with that, you know, we don't just have a busy season. We have all year round. And and so trying to. Be OK with the fact that I wasn't going to be able to do everything that I wanted to do. And that I may have to just. Do what is. Good enough in some cases, which kind of hurt my heart because I just had between the marketing practice, the internal sustainability, the you know, the, you know, the stain, sustainability practice. I was leaving my firms to DEI efforts. And then COVID hit and all the things that came along with that, it just there was a lot of plates that I was spinning. And so just. Trying to figure out how to manage all of that and really getting good at time management, project management and drawing a line in the sand and holding it when it came to my own personal time and keeping it sacred for my own sanity. As I was building, you know my marketing team and building my sustainability practice. There are certain tasks and things that I had to delegate and some of them I didn't want to delegate right I'm I'm first and foremost a a graphic designer and so to hand my graphic design over to another human that that was painful to do because that that fueled my soul in a way that I just. But I didn't have time to do it anymore. I needed to that delegate to elevate and to get really good at that took time and it was hard. And then finally to. Basically, find and hire my replacement for the marketing department and hand my 10 year old baby over to somebody that that was really hard to try to find somebody. Who could come in and take over and? That that was that was challenging as well. So I think that that delegation piece your own project management and time management skills and trying to do both because you're going to probably. Have to do both for. While you know I had to run marketing and build a practice for five years before I could finally extricate myself into full time sustainability. And then that was scary in itself. And that kind of impostor syndrome of, like, you know, why are you doing this? And and and. Who do you think you are and kind of battling that, you know, that voice in the back of your head and because, you know, shifting from 25 years of marketing to a brand new career? That, you know, wasn't even built. There was no other firm. In the United States, or I think, or in Europe, that had a practice like this. And so building something like that from scratch, without anything to compare against was was another challenge.

Gosh, I love everything you touch on. I feel like any entrepreneur that has ever built a business can relate to what you just. And I I remember all of those things I remember like, can I really do this? Like, do I really know what I'm talking about? Right, those are like, that's the little voice in your head. And I remember a business coach telling me, you know, a number of years ago, like, you still think of yourself as this. Like, I I literally still thought of myself as this, like, young. Intern, who has only had a few years of. Experience he's like, but you don't. Be confident in what you know and and be confident. More importantly, this is what I tell people anytime they're building something to be confident in your capability. You're never going to know all the. Answers right? You. Didn't know the answers. You had nothing to. Compare yourself to right. Hasn't been done. You're definitely a trailblazer, but you know,

confident in the ability to figure it out and problem solve and put things together. I think that's such a critical a critical piece and doesn't matter whether you're building a practice or. You're looking to take a step up in your career. I think that there's this element of battling some of those, those fears that we have that turn into roadblocks at the same time, it's kind of like an intertwined, you know, Hornets nest.

And we were talking before before this podcast about you. Know you're saying I'm such a trailblazer, like. I didn't want to be. I that wasn't my intention, right. I just wanted to do something I was passionate about and to get me on my path to partner and you know that that was, that was my goal. And this, you know, other stuff come out. Just came out of.

Well, I know we've only got a few minutes left and so as we start to. Wrap you know we. Are on a mission to help firms be more strategic and their marketing professionals play a really critical role in that marketing and sales. And so any advice that you can leave for our listeners around? You know what's some practical tips? What are some things that they can do today? Right. Start doing today that will help them, you know, on that journey.

Yeah, I think what's really exciting to see in the evolution of marketing, accounting, marketing in just these last 10 years is. We're not just doing the traditional marketing, we're suddenly falling into business development and into into sales. And I think the best thing I can advice I can give is to. I know this is going to sound bad, but stop calling yourself a marketer. Start calling yourself a growth person because that's really what we're doing now is we are growing. The firm we. Are growing practices. We are growing people and to really start calling yourself a growth officer. And and embracing the business development and embracing the sales piece, I know there's a lot of marketers who are just like I I'm trying to get the marketing stuff done and I don't have time for all of this. Embrace it. Take take a. Minute to embrace it. You know, there's there's lots of great programs out there, you know, aim has its own business development certificate and things. Like, look for ways to embrace and lean into those things, because that is where you're going to get your seat at the table because you know, find somebody to to really. You know, work with you on taking over some of the marketing stuff and really, really lean in, in the business development and sales aspect of it and that kind of growth mindset and and when you go speak to your partners and your senior managers and whatnot and your directors talk about being a growth person and call yourself a growth. Because that's, I think where we're really going to. Start leaning towards and I think what is needed. And and you know, follow through on on that and lean in.

I love that you talk about that because I think those skill sets are so transferable we we talk about sales and training all the time and shameless plug here, right and about as to sales training program. And I would say that there is, you know, at least 20% of our participants are now either in a recruiting or in a. Growth role for their firm, you know, formally or informally. In some way and so. Those skill sets are so important to selling ideas to connecting with people, to reading them. It's, you know, the basis of all of it is soft skills at the end of the day. And I don't believe that there's ever a moment where you can't continue. To hone some of those so. Jennifer, thank you so much for joining us today. And sharing your story, it's so wonderful to see your accomplishments and your success as you've done a great job and are continuing to do a great job. And thank you for being a thought leader in our profession.