

Transforming the Team from the Top – The Role of the Female Chief Executive Officer

At a recent NIRI Los Angeles event, two leaders shared what it's like to be among the few female CEOs of publicly traded companies and offered advice on how to successfully drive an IR effort.

BY KIMBERLY ESTERKIN

In November 2018, women of the Los Angeles NIRI chapter along with a few brave NIRI men joined fellow female members of the Los Angeles Ellevate Chapter, a network for professional women, to listen to and be inspired by a panel on the role of the female chief executive officer.

Heidi Nazarudin, CEO of Marque Media and Therese Tucker, CEO of BlackLine, relayed to attendees the hardships and triumphs of bringing a private company public, while also being one of the very few female chief executive officers of a publicly listed company in the United States. The discussion was moderated by Christine Shin, partner at Russ August & Kabat Law.

This event was inspired by recent California legislation, SB-826, a transformative bill signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown that requires at least one woman to be on California-headquartered public company boards by the end of 2019. By 2021, boards with five members must have at least two women with director seats, and boards with six members must have at least three women with director seats.

Despite the progress made toward accelerating the role of women in the workplace, in 2017 not a single company that went public in the United States had a female on their board, an astonishing

fact noted by Betsy Berkhemer-Credaire, CEO of 2020 Woman on Boards and one of the authors of SB-826, who impressed the audience when she stood to thank the panelists for addressing the new legislation.

Today, 4.8 percent of Fortune 500 companies have female chief executive officers, an improvement from 1995 when there were no female CEOs at Fortune 500 companies, and 1972, when Katharine Graham became the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company when she was appointed CEO of The Washington Post Co. Progress has been made, but admittedly not enough. California is leading the way in making changes to the C-suite and Board of Directors, but there's still a long way to go.

So, what is it like to be one of the few female chief executive officers of a publicly traded company, and how do you command the attention of your shareholder base?

It's About the Hair

"It started out as a dare," said Tucker as she relayed to the audience the reasoning behind her pink hair.

"I had a marketing department that wanted me to do a really boring video," she continued. "It has this older woman with a bun and a scarf; so, I kept pushing back. Our company produces accounting software. We are going to put people to sleep forever!"



Kimberly Esterkin introducing the panelists.

“You can’t be successful if you are sitting on your butt. You have to move. You have to take action.”

Therese Tucker, CEO, BlackLine

“And then I thought, either I’m going to back down [from this video] or dye my hair pink. So, I checked with my Board of Directors, and I went to Vidal Sassoon in Beverly Hills.”

Tucker’s pink hair remains her signature trademark, a social experiment that has become a part of who she is and a defining characteristic as one of the few female CEOs of a publicly listed company. In fact, when BlackLine went public, the company’s directors and management team showed up at the NASDAQ ready to ring the bell – or push the button – adorned in pink wigs.

When asked what message this sent to investors, Tucker responded with a wry smile, “You know, accountants are people too,” and then went on to explain the importance of individuality.

In a sea of publicly traded software companies, Tucker learned that crafting the best differentiated message is essential to generating shareholder interest. She explained that if you cannot tell your shareholder base what you do as a company very clearly, very simply, and very quickly, you’ll lose their attention and they’ll move on. Going public, Tucker concluded, was an essential part of refining her company’s message.

Keeping Shareholder Attention

For Tucker, pink hair was part of her brand, her image, and for Nazarudin, who deems herself the self-proclaimed “ambitionista,” being a woman is part and parcel to her success. At 25, Nazarudin was one of the youngest vice presidents at Citibank. One of her clients encouraged her to assume the role of their CEO, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Now in the public spotlight, Nazarudin quickly came to grasp the importance of media training along with a strong investor relations campaign.

“I could talk about investor relations for another hour,” Nazarudin remarked. A key to a productive IR campaign, she explained, is that you have to be very clear with your internal and external stakeholders regarding your underlying messages, and then consistently stick with your core talking points. At the same time, you don’t have to answer every question. It’s okay, she reminded the audience, to tell your shareholders that you’ll get back to them. Investor relations for Nazarudin provided her the “points to pivot on” when the conversation headed down a winding path.

Succeeding in the Public Space

Describing her role as both a CEO and mother, Tucker



Left to right: Christine Shin, moderator and partner at Russ August & Kabat Law; Therese Tucker, CEO of Black-Line; Heidi Nazarudin, CEO of Marque Media

confided to the audience, “When you are trying to do it all, you can’t do it all perfectly. When my kids were young, there would be multiple times I’d forget them at school. And the school would close and say ‘the school is now closed and it’s a \$1 a minute that you’re late.’ But I had my heart in both jobs, and my children know I would drop everything for them. It’s your heart, it’s your priorities, and it’s giving yourself some grace for not being perfect. Because you can be successful without being perfect.”

Nazarudin concurred, explaining that all professional women need to develop a support system of different levels, so that you can grow and sustain yourself. “Don’t apologize,” Nazarudin emphasized, “you will never make everyone happy all of the time.”

Nazarudin then recalled the early days in her career, the long nights, the extreme dedication to her job. “I was sleeping at the office,” she said. “I had a sleeping bag. It was a Prada sleeping bag, but I was still sleeping at the office.”

Tucker added to Nazarudin’s remarks and described the hectic schedule she endured dur-

ing the IPO roadshow process for her company.

“Hearing you talk about it is making me tired again,” Nazarudin replied, remembering her similar experience and the day her former company went public. “I did not ring the bell. I was too tired to ring the bell.”

Looking Ahead

The path to success – whether female or male in investor relations – is never A to Z. It’s a winding road that involves many twists and turns. Nonetheless, one key piece of advice was offered by Tucker in closing the event.

“You can’t be successful,” she urged, “if you are sitting on your butt. You have to move. You have to take action. You have to keep persisting. If something is not working, you have to change it and move forward.” [IR](#)

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