

## People Watching

By Sandra M. Carman

### From secretary to “icon of the industry”: A conversation with Sharon Olson on 20 years as company president

**Chicago Loop News:** It's been 20 years since you went 'off on your own' and founded a marketing communications firm for the foodservice industry, hoping that clients would knock on your door. What is it like now, having Olson Communications celebrate its 20th year in business?

**Sharon Olson:** It's hard to believe that it's still so much fun. But it took patience, and refusing to give up or compromise on our standards of service. 'Having clients knocking on the door' didn't really happen for quite a few years, but when it did, that was very exciting. And, you know, when I started Olson Communication, people were skeptical that this business model of 'staying small but offering clients more' would be successful—but now, it's often characterized as 'brilliant.'

**CLN:** Is it true that you worked as a secretary right out of college?

**Olson:** It absolutely is true. The big shock to me was that the magnum cum laude degree I achieved in two and a half years was less important than how fast I could type and how good I was at making coffee. But I made sure that I learned that business inside and out, even though I was typing memos and answering phones. I took what I knew and got a better job.

**CLN:** Let's look at college. How important was formal education in preparing you to create a business that has lasted 20 years?

**Olson:** Education was crucial. You need the best education you can get. That means working as hard as you can in school, and then applying what you've learned at work.

I didn't go to Ivy League schools. My M.B.A. is from Keller Graduate School, and my undergrad degree is from Western Illinois in Macomb. But I worked hard, and my MBA is “with distinction” and my B.A. is magna cum laude. I wanted to excel.

I love learning – I would get the college catalog and have as much fun with it as I did a fashion magazine. Everything looked so new and interesting, I wanted to study it all.

The joke in our office is, if I ever retire, I'll spend my time traveling the world to attend industry conferences.

Education shouldn't stop. You keep learning, keep yourself sharp by taking courses. For instance, DePaul has “certificates of advanced studies” in all areas of marketing. And do what it takes to earn professional credentials in your industry as well.

**CLN:** What's the deal about “icon of the industry?”

**Olson:** Oh my. That one surprised me, too. I was speaking at a foodservice industry conference in 2007, and that's how I was introduced. I think it happened because I've been involved for many years in the industry associations, volunteered on committees, did the lowly work and was always really committed to having the industry grow in size and stature.

**CLN:** Would you say you are devoted to the foodservice industry?

**Olson:** Yes, absolutely. It helps that I'm interested in its aspects, so that makes it easy to devote time and energy to trade associations and professional groups. And in foodservice, we've got groups for everyone -- for equipment manufacturers or editorial councils, for restaurateurs and chefs or convenience store operators, for supermarket delis or research chefs.

There's an entire segment that feeds our students – from pre-schoolers to college kids – and that's really important. And there are continuing education needs for each of these groups. And some groups, like Les Dames d'Escoffier, cut across many segments.

I'm a relatively new member of Les Dames. It's an international women's organization that supports women in the culinary professions by awarding scholarships, and sponsoring educational and philanthropic programs. The women of Les Dames also actively advocate sustainable agriculture, garden-to-table educational projects, and helping communities make healthy and informed food choices. I love that it's more about making our world a better place than about career building.

**CLN:** What makes Olson Communications different from other foodservice marketing communications companies?

**Olson:** For one, we're known for great parties! But, that's part of having a culture of innovation. We're never complacent. We also develop strong relationship with our clients, which often means they are our advocates, and that builds our business.

Of course, we have great creative; great creative is the 'cost of entry' in our business. In addition to having great ideas, you also must be relevant to the end customer and consistently deliver on your promises over time. So, we field our own research to help us understand foodservice customers and their consumers.



**Sharon Olson,  
President,  
Olson Communications**

We value our clients and offer them proprietary information, special experiences (our parties!) and expert knowledge at no cost. Our Culinary Visions Panel™ taps restaurateurs' ideas about dining, menus and customers, and our Street Smarts™ program shares unique information we gather through surveys, research projects and attending industry conferences.

We also make sure we understand our clients' businesses from the inside out. We do an immersion process that helps us gain an in-depth understanding of their products, corporate culture and the competition, so we can help them communicate their distinctive points of difference in a way that is uniquely relevant to their customers.

**CLN:** Will you share one idea that really set you apart from your competition?

**Olson:** In the 1990s, to get new business, we gave away free advice! We created “Food for Thought.” – a series of essays about critical issues facing our industry. Instead of developing slick marketing pieces that pitched our services, we sent these columns to potential clients. We demonstrated our strategic approaches to industry issues with topics like: Is Your Advertising Written by Politicians? Should Your Direct Mail Budget go to Charity? Are You Playing to Win, or Just Playing Not to Lose? Are You Hunkered Down When You Should be Charging? Tight Budgets Make For Tight Choices. And, it worked. We got noticed!

Since 1988, Olson Communications at 445 W. Erie in Chicago, has specialized in offering marketing communications strategies to food business clients in the United States and abroad.