

# Michelle Boggs

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## The Goal to Give Back

"Well, Mount McKinley is the tallest peak in North America," came Amanda Weathersby's voice through the phone.

Michelle Boggs considered this a moment. It was a somewhat relaxed Saturday morning, and the two business partners were batting around names for the new marketing consulting firm they were preparing to launch. The symbolic element in the suggestion was certainly appealing—the size, strength, and majesty of the highest mountain in the country would be hard to beat.

"Tying the company to a national landmark like that would be so fitting, too, because marketing is as American as apple pie," Amanda added. Michelle agreed, and thus, McKinley Marketing Partners was named.

McKinley was founded as a spinoff from Amanda's company, The Weathersby Group, which had a parallel focus and was launched in 1991. At the time, Michelle was running a nonprofit that was proving difficult to fund when she read about Amanda and her business model in the Washington Post. Fascinated by the concept, she contacted the entrepreneur with characteristic proactive diligence. Amanda was originally hoping to hire Michelle to work in business development but happened to hear about a project that would be perfect for her new acquaintance's skill set, so Michelle instead assumed the role of an independent contractor. However, despite working on various projects for Amanda throughout the next three years, she still had the opportunity to participate in the business development aspect of the company more intimately than most contractors would.

The unique knowledge Michelle acquired through experiencing both facets of the company in this manner was suddenly thrust into the spotlight when the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was first being discussed. The reform would

escalate competition between the various telecom companies, and Amanda wanted to keep a low profile in order to maintain peace and good relations. Michelle, however, saw the tremendous value in the changing landscape, and the two women joined with one other partner to create McKinley with the idea that it would service other telecom groups not yet associated with Weathersby. Since then, Michelle has acquired full ownership of the firm, which is headquartered in the DC metro area but has also opened offices in Dallas and New York.

From the time of its inception in 1995, the company has lived up to its namesake, gaining reputé and growth through its service to the commercial sector and primarily the Fortune 500 companies that look to it for support and insight. These are companies with robust marketing divisions who look to McKinley not to outsource their needs, but rather to fill gaps when their workload exceeds their capacity for whatever reason. McKinley, in turn, supplies marketing professionals that have served in corporate America as employees but hope to transition into independent contractors. Though

ninety-eight percent of their business draws from interim or project work, they do facilitate permanent placement when requested.

Likewise, McKinley does supply strategic marketing planning and project development services, but these more generalized requests are somewhat rare. Rather, when a client approaches Michelle's company, they typically have a clear and detailed idea of the type of skill set they seek. McKinley then draws upon its database of available contractors. The system holds comprehensive demographic and professional information of between three and four hundred contacts at any given time with the intent that any proposed requirement can be filled promptly and, true to Michelle's perfectionist nature, ideally.



"We match the skill set and what looks good on paper, but we also make sure it's a cultural fit," she explains. "This is why it's so important for us to get to know the client and their culture in advance so, when a requirement does come in, we'll be able to match more efficiently and effectively." Conversely, McKinley is highly selective in terms of its contractors and screens each of its candidates rigorously before accepting an individual into their database as an Interim Marketing Manager (IMM).

In addition to its ironclad methodology, McKinley is highly unique in the fact of its ultra-specialization. While more and more publicly traded staffing companies are carving out a marketing services arm, McKinley is among the only firms dedicated solely to the industry. "This specialization may sound narrow, but the world of marketing is actually far more diverse than many people realize," Michelle points out. "We have fifty-five marketing specialties under our own umbrella—product, product marketing, product development, communications, public relations, public affairs, etc. Furthermore, all these components have either a business-to-business or business-to-consumer element." She also acknowledges online and digital marketing, which is in a state of perpetual evolution and progress. Focusing specifically on marketing consulting allows McKinley to be at the top of its game, able to offer their clients the most fresh and innovative solutions.

The company's high functionality is further enabled through its proprietary database, McKinley Information Management System. The tool is the centerpiece of the firm's organization and infrastructure, maintaining their recruiting, requirement management, and project management elements through a very intuitive and synchronized technology. All of this is accomplished through a web-based interface, which Michelle fortuitously invested in long before the technology was popular. The database boasts the robustness typically found only in larger companies, allowing McKinley to remain competitive and efficient even when operating with a fairly lean staff. "You must be willing to invest in the tools, processes, and procedures that will allow your team to succeed," Michelle explains. "Without the customization of our database, we would still be flying by the seat of our pants the way we were back when I was doing everything myself. You just can't grow and

sustain that way."

This resolute commitment to firm foundational processes seems to resemble the kind of practice-makes-perfect attitude demonstrated by many serious athletes, which makes sense considering Michelle's sports-infused history. She had been an avid tennis player throughout high school and college, later working with World Championship Tennis, headquartered in Dallas from 1984 to 1987. She was then recruited by ProServ, an internationally acclaimed sports management firm, to run their men's senior tennis tour, which proved to be no small feat. She reflects on this period of her life as a defining epoch in terms of skill development and business experience. From public relations to site selection management to negotiating with promoters, sponsors, and players, she got her feet wet in virtually every aspect of the leadership and management. "They really just threw me in, and it was great training grounds for running a business," she says.

Her affinity to tennis struggled later, however, when she suffered a debilitating skiing accident and was faced with three shoulder surgeries over the span of eighteen months. Through her intensive daily physical therapy sessions, she befriended a mountain climber who had shattered his ankle in a freak accident. When she found out he would soon lose his leg due to a bone infection, Michelle's mind focused around the profound sense of loss echoed in each of their plights. Identifying this underserved societal ill, she decided to create a nonprofit foundation that would provide products and services for elite athletes that suffered psychological and emotional effects after being separated from their sport due to an injury. The foundation, called the Athletic Counseling and Training Institute, would publish an expansive series of newsletters. Each issue would revolve around a specific type of injury through the commentary of doctors, psychologists, and advanced athletes who had suffered and coped with the ailment first-hand.

Though the project was underwritten for several test issues and received ample positive feedback, Michelle attributes the lack of funding that ensued to the fear and uncertainty generated through Clinton's health care reform proposal. She remained committed to the fledgling organization as she earned a living through consulting for Weathersby, but in the end she

sensed that her calling lay down a different path. Had she not pursued this path, McKinley would not exist today.

This is not to suggest, however, that Michelle's commitment and future plans do not remain steadfastly committed to serving a greater good. In truth, her next endeavor will most likely be charitably inclined. Though she had been mentally developing a business plan for such a project for quite some time, she originally felt as though she had to wait until other goals were accomplished—namely, selling McKinley to the appropriate buyer. After recently meeting entrepreneur and philanthropist Ted Leonsis, however, she was particularly compelled by the sense of urgency inherent in his idea of corporate social responsibility. This influence led her to the invaluable realization that nothing was stopping her from making her move today. "I intend to launch an initiative in which a certain portion of our clients' payments goes directly to a charity of their choosing," she says excitedly. She hopes to start the initiative by funneling donations to organizations supporting women and children in need. Contractors would have the opportunity to donate as well, and each participant would be able to track the sum of their contributions through McKinley's website. "Ultimately, then, I hope to leave the professional legacy that I gave more than I got," says Michelle, quoting Leonsis.

To young entrepreneurs entering the workplace today, Michelle cautions about the stark divide between campus life and the business realm. "College certainly teaches you the discipline of learning, but it doesn't prepare you for the real world," she explains. How does one, then, adequately prepare for the rat race? While

she feels that getting an MBA should provide substantial advantage, there is also much to be said for learning from those close to you. From an early age, for example, Michelle had the privilege of observing her stepfather, who was a serial entrepreneur with many failures, some successes, and then one big success later on. Competitive by nature and fueled by his example, Michelle had made it her goal to start her own business by age thirty. The fact that she was five years behind her preordained schedule hardly matters in light of the fact that her goal was, in fact, so successfully accomplished. With her history of achievement, then, one can optimistically look toward Michelle's future as one with tremendous potential for continued enrichment as she strives to spin get into give.

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

