

Elizabeth Shea

Making Connections

Elizabeth Shea's parents always taught her independence from the time she was a little girl.

When she was 12, Elizabeth's family left Vermont to move to Oregon, driving cross-country in a camper with an "Oregon or Bust" bumper sticker. "My dad always tells me this story about that trip," Elizabeth laughs. "Every Sunday he would go out and get us a half-dozen donuts. There were five of us and six donuts, so we'd always argue over who got the last one. Finally, my dad said to me, 'Beth, when you grow up, you better marry a millionaire because you always want, want, want!' And I said, 'Dad, I'm not going to marry a millionaire, I'm going to be a millionaire!'"

Now the Executive Vice President at REQ and previously the CEO of the public relations (PR) and marketing firm SpeakerBox for 21 years, Elizabeth's self-reliant nature has served her well. From a young age, she knew she'd like to own her own business, though she had no idea she'd end up working in PR. "SpeakerBox evolved to be a PR firm," Elizabeth notes. "I didn't even have a background in public relations, I was more of a technology geek."

Before the founding of SpeakerBox, Elizabeth had worked extensively in marketing. PR was something of a different beast but one she took to immediately. "I get joy in connecting people," reflects Elizabeth. "It's the core of who I am. Being a connector is what I love about what I do because it's all about connecting clients to reporters or to customers. PR is relationship building, and I quickly found that I loved it."

Originally founded as Magellan Marketing, Elizabeth decided to launch the company after witnessing firsthand the lack of PR and marketing options in the technology space. At the time, almost every major PR firm in the region focused on public affairs. "There was only one firm

in town that could even spell 'technology,'" deadpans Elizabeth. "I was working as a director of marketing at the time, and we invited that one firm to our office to discuss tech PR. It quickly became obvious that they didn't understand our business or the technology landscape at all. I decided, if there aren't any marketing firms that know tech, I could launch a marketing firm that does."

That was 1997. In 1999, Elizabeth brought on a partner, Kristi Hedges, who was a PR expert working as an independent contractor at the time. Kristi joined Elizabeth's firm of four people, and the small business rebranded as SheaHedges.

SheaHedges quickly began to grow. The firm was one of the first in town to offer marketing and PR for the burgeoning tech industry, and the late 90s were a boom time. Retainers were running higher than \$20,000 a month and newly funded operations were looking for publicity every day.

When that bubble eventually burst, SheaHedges was able to outlast its competitors with its diversified client base. The firm had been representing the public sector sales side of many large businesses, and it was these business-to-government clients that held them over through the downturn. "We had focused on building those business-to-government clients, and that carried us through," nods Elizabeth. "I'm not saying we didn't have a dip, but those companies still sold to government during the dotcom bust. A lot of our competition didn't make it because their firms were primarily dotcom tech—we were more like half and half, so we were fortunate."

In 2006, Kristi chose to make an exit from the firm, pursuing her passion of becoming a leadership coach and author. On her tenth anniversary, Elizabeth decided to rebrand again. With typical transparency, Elizabeth brought the



whole staff together to come up with options and then make the final decision. It was then that a staff member came up with the name “SpeakerBox” during a company-wide brainstorming session.

By this time, Elizabeth had decided to really lean in on the firm’s capabilities in PR and content development. “I wanted to be laser-focused in doing what we do best,” she explains, “and in the tech sector in this region, be the best at it.” The firm continued to grow, expanding its client base and stressing its company values—scrappiness, caring, drive for high performance, and commitment to the team.

Finally, in 2017, Elizabeth began shopping for a partner or buyer for the company. She still wanted to remain in management and didn’t want to be absorbed into a giant firm. She wanted to be part of a larger organization that could offer a broader range of services. Times were changing, and it made sense for businesses to hire agencies for all their marketing needs under one roof. “There’s a spectrum of services called PESO,” explains Elizabeth, “paid media, earned media, social and shared media, and owned media. Those four areas drive different services. Paid media would be any kind of advertising, on or offline. Shared and social media is what people are sharing through different channels. Owned media would be what you create, your blog, your website for example. Earned media is anything that’s not controlled by you; in effect, what other third-parties are writing about you. So, that usually covers media relationships, analyst relations, award recognition, etc. And that was SpeakerBox before we merged with REQ. We helped people gain third party validation through other people talking about them.”

REQ, a leading digital marketing and brand management firm, was well equipped to offer the paid, social, and owned media services, but they sought a partner to get the earned media piece. “As the market has evolved, we found the same thing REQ found,” says Elizabeth. “Everything is so much more interconnected now that we found ourselves increasingly working with other agencies, and we couldn’t control the work those other agencies did. I had to figure out how to grow into the next generation.” It took her two years of searching, but eventually, REQ CEO Tripp Donnelly and Elizabeth worked out a deal, with REQ acquiring SpeakerBox in January 2019. Today,

REQ is set to surpass 110 employees.

Although she was raised to believe in herself, becoming a powerful executive in the Nation’s Capital was far from Elizabeth’s mind while she was growing up in rural, picturesque Vermont. The family lived not in downtown Burlington, but in South Burlington, a suburb. “I wanted to be Dorothy Hamill when I grew up,” smiles Elizabeth. The town was small, and the kids walked to school, the park, their sports games, and everywhere they wanted to go. Elizabeth dropped dance classes, but she excelled at running cross country and track, and studied piano and guitar through high school.

Elizabeth had been shy in elementary school, but a big move to Oregon from Vermont helped build her self-confidence. In five years, Elizabeth attended five different schools. She believes making so many changes so quickly taught her to become more extroverted, learning how to make friends quickly over and over again.

The big move was brought on by her father’s desire to attend graduate school. He had been a school guidance counselor and was looking to move into administration. The family moved to Oregon so her father could pursue a Master’s in Education and Administration. Initially, they only planned to stay until his degree was completed, but after graduation, he was offered a job in nearby Albany, Oregon, as a school principal, and the Sheas decided to stay.

After several years of upheaval, Elizabeth began to feel like she belonged to her community as she entered high school. She loved playing softball and running cross country, and outside of class she also joined the cheerleading squad and the Future Business Leaders of America Club. As a senior, she was voted onto the Homecoming Court, alongside her sister. She showed an interest in computers, although, at the time, girls were not always encouraged to pursue coding. Her strongest subjects were math and science, and today, Elizabeth is a strong advocate for STEM education for young women.

Elizabeth’s father was the principal of her high school, which meant she always had an eye or two on her. She remembers her parents as strict, making certain she came home at reasonable hours and emphasizing education. The family worked hard to make ends meet; Elizabeth took to sewing her own clothes and cutting her own hair, even cutting classmates’ hair for money once she got the

hang of it.

Elizabeth had been planning to attend community college, but instead, based on the good fortune of finding a scholarship through Knights of Columbus, she applied to and received admission to Santa Clara University, where she studied business and marketing. While there, she took on odd jobs to cover her expenses, delivering the San Jose Mercury News every morning, and even selling books door-to-door one summer. After graduation in 1987, she was recruited by a then not well-known company called Apple to provide marketing geared toward distributors. At first, she was assigned to the higher education channel, but later, she transitioned to commercial and then government distributors.

During her three years there, she came into contact with a company called Falcon which down the road would become her employer when she relocated to the Washington, DC area. She worked at Apple for three years, then left for a marketing manager role for a start-up called SuperMac, and then another startup called Momenta Computer. It was a time of recession, however, and after a year, the start-up went under, and Elizabeth was in the market for a new role.

Around this same time, she went to Washington DC to visit her then-boyfriend and scope out the East Coast. It was while she was visiting him that she reconnected with friends at Falcon and was offered a job there. For two years she worked as a marketing manager for Falcon, before deciding she'd like to strike out on her own. For the first time, she was her own boss, working as an independent consultant for several clients including her former employer, a firm called EdgeMark, and a third company called Institutional Shareholder Services. Elizabeth was new to the consulting game and had a lot to learn about managing multiple clients while not getting burned out. After a couple years of working days, nights and weekend, she decided to accept a full-time role with her client EdgeMark, where mentor Lee Raesly brought her on.

After two and a half years with EdgeMark, in 1997, Elizabeth was ready to try her hand at independence again. It was at EdgeMark that she noted the lack of PR services offered to tech firms, and set out to establish Magellan Marketing, the company that would later flourish into SpeakerBox. Her first client was Craig Abod, the CEO of a government reseller, and she built out

her team subletting space in his office. He has served as a mentor, friend and client to this day.

Elizabeth's story is full of names of those who helped her along the way. But her first mentors, of course, were her parents, whom she considers to be role models in their own right. From her mother, Elizabeth says she got her independence. From her father, his sociability and outgoing nature. "My parents are like the Mayors of DC," laughs Elizabeth. "My dad can't walk into a restaurant without chatting somebody up. He's a friendly, funny, charismatic guy. He had a lot of success in his career, going into schools and turning them around by really engaging with the community. As an English major, my mom inspired me to become the writer and reader that I am today. She worked in community relations for years and inspired the connectedness I take pride in delivering."

As a leader, Elizabeth considers herself to be transparent, authentic, and focused on the community. She believes in sharing financial statements and balance sheets with the staff, explaining what they mean and offering context where needed, noting that this type of communication has led the staff to become far more engaged. When she hires, she focuses on hiring not so much for a specific skill set, but for intelligence, warmth and positivity, noting that her ideal employees are 'smart and happy'.

"We're all in this together," she affirms, "I think that's empowering for people to feel that. One of the things I've been told about myself is, even if I don't agree, I'll at least listen. I'm very open door minded, I'm willing to hear what you have to say. I've always had a coach, through Vistage, EO, or my own business coach. I think it's important to continue to listen and better yourself. I've been told that's very empowering for people, because they feel they can give feedback."

Along those same lines, Elizabeth's advice to young people graduating college today revolves around asking questions and listening to others. "Seek advice and counsel from anyone you can," she encourages. "It can be frustrating when you don't see younger people doing that as much today. I would encourage people to seek out help from all generations and to find a mentor. The people around you can help!"

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– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).



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