

# A lifetime of learning:

## Two Wichita, Kan., practitioners settle for nothing less than excellence

*This issue's profile features Carolyn Russell, APR, president and founder, and Lynn Woolf, APR, vice president of Russell Public Relations in Wichita, Kan. During the transition to the new year, Russell and Woolf spoke with Leah Elison, editorial coordinator for Tactics, about ethics, professional development and Midwestern friendliness.*

**You clearly state your code of ethics on your Web site. Could you talk about your ethical philosophy?**

**Carolyn Russell, APR:** We're not shy about speaking out if we feel like the client is going in a wrong direction. It doesn't happen often, but if we have an issue we talk openly about the way a client is thinking about approaching it. That's our role as a counselor. Sometimes it is a difficult conversation, but generally it isn't because that is what they are paying us to do.

**Lynn Woolf, APR:** It says something about our company's commitment to our clients. We know that there are other choices they can make in terms of raising awareness of their brand, but we

believe in the power of public relations. We believe if we make a commitment and understand their goals, we can help them meet those goals. Also, it fosters loyalty.

**What advice would you give to someone starting their own firm about having a clear statement of ethics?**

**Russell:** If you don't [define your ethics], you don't have standards to start your business with. Ethics are a major part of your blueprint of how to do things. When we look at people to work with us or to add as team members, not only do we explain what our ethics are, but we also explain that what we expect from ourselves is excellence. And excellence isn't just a word.

**Woolf:** It goes back to your personal reputation and your company's reputation. Whether you're starting or established, your success and how potential clients view you has to do with your ethics, honesty, loyalty and commitment to excellence.

**Why did you decide to pursue Accreditation?**

**Russell:** I did it in 1994. The process crystallizes your strategic thinking. Although it covers things that some of us already know through experience, it adds structure. As we add people to the company, if they are going to be a solid member of the team, one of their goals in their first two years of employment will be working to get their APR.

**Woolf:** Some people look at moving to the next level as moving positions or companies, but the APR helps you get to the next level personally and gives you a better understanding of what your role is.

**What surprised you about the process of earning your APR?**

**Woolf:** It was more comprehensive than I expected. I didn't come from a PR background so I felt it was my opportunity to dig into all areas of public relations. Even though the test was computer based and multiple choice, I was surprised at the complexity of the questions; they really made you think. To figure out which was the best answer, you had to draw on your experience as well as the new knowledge you had gained.



Lynn Woolf, APR (left), and Carolyn Russell, APR.

I thought the oral presentation and written portfolio were a great chance to feel good about what you'd accomplished, from the research to the metrics. It, of course, helped me professionally, but it also helped me feel more confident about what I know.

**How has being mentored and mentoring others influenced your career?**

**Woolf:** Learning by example is so important when you're in a professional position. Working with Carolyn helped me understand that public relations is not just a news story or special event. When you are outside of public relations you only see one side of it, and you don't understand what it can do for a company.

As for my role as a mentor, I'm just beginning that aspect of my career. I have 10 years of experience now and my Accreditation; it's time for me to move forward.

**Russell:** I had good people help me in my early years. When I worked at Boeing, I had the best mentor. He was known as a curmudgeon. You'd ask a question about a major project, and you wouldn't know what to do next, and he'd say, "Just handle it, Russell." So that's what you did. I learned more from him than from anyone else in my whole career.

I've always left my door open to young people or colleagues. I've especially tried to help mentor women. I have a policy that if you call, I'll help. It's important. We all owe that.

**Have you seen opportunities for women in public relations change? Do you think young female practitioners appreciate what more experienced female practitioners have done to promote equality?**

**Russell:** I hope young women are

paying attention to what is happening in advertising and media — so that they don't lose ground. I see the return of sexist advertising, and I see women portrayed in demeaning roles or as helpless victims of violence in media. Even though we also see many strong images of women in TV and film, those other images hurt us. Still, this doesn't seem of any particular concern to some young women I know. They don't see that these things can

lead to other acceptable practices, like lower pay or fewer chances for promotions. Even though the gap is smaller, we still don't have gender pay equity in this country. My concern is that we don't go backward.

**Is there a strong network of communicators in Wichita?**

**Russell:** There is a good network, and it's respectful too. I have certainly referred potential clients to colleagues and other agencies, and I have been blessed that other people have referred clients to me. We have lunches together routinely and I consider many of my PRSA colleagues my friends. It is a very inclusive environment. A lot of that is due to Midwestern friendliness.

**Woolf:** Also, the Chapter has very good programs at the monthly meetings and the annual professional development conferences. The professionals here are looking to learn from each other.

**What is a typical day like for you?**

**Russell:** We have a teleconference with clients. Many are out of the area so we do lots of work on the phone. I may have other meetings, work on strategy and meet with new clients. Then we typically do media relations work. We've been doing some interesting new things using all kinds of new tools. I thought the news release was dead about four years ago, but we just use it in a whole new way today.

**Woolf:** I do a lot of follow up and a fair amount of writing. I do a lot of media relations work so I am always watching for story opportunities, reading industry publications, watching what's happening in our clients' industries and looking for ways to tell their story. **T**

### Getting to know Carolyn Russell, APR, and Lynn Woolf, APR.

#### Favorite movie or book?

**Russell:** "The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl," by Timothy Egan

**Woolf:** "Moonstruck"

#### Favorite thing about living in Wichita?

**Russell:** "Great friends and colleagues, friendly people, clean air, easy commutes, art and music, entrepreneurial spirit, and caramel malts at the Old Mill Tasty Shop."

**Woolf:** "Wichita is just the right size — large enough to offer great recreation, entertainment, cultural events, etc., yet small enough to have that good 'hometown' feel."

#### If you could be a strategic PR counselor for any historical figure, who would it be?

**Russell:** "Elvis. Fire the colonel; dump the drugs and the entourage. Live, man."

**Woolf:** John F. Kennedy. **T**