

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Detroit Story

Marlo Fogelman grew up in West Bloomfield and envisioned a future career as a lawyer, but a chance project with a friend helped launch a successful marketing firm.

BY TOM MURRAY

Marlo Fogelman, founder and CEO of Marlo Marketing, a Boston-based public relations and creative services firm, says her career turned out to be a dramatic departure from what she thought she wanted to do when she was a little girl.

"I can't go back far enough to remember exactly when, but I was probably 8 years old (and) I wanted to be a lawyer," Fogelman says. "Not because I watched 'Perry Mason,' and said I want to do that. It was more that I liked to communicate and argue, and someone (told me I) should be a lawyer."

Fogelman grew up along Buckingham Trail in West Bloomfield. Her mother was a travel agent and her father was a podiatrist who had four or five offices and a lot of patients in the auto industry.

"We were always moving around," she recalls. "This was a time when a lot of families who lived in the Detroit suburbs were proud that they never went downtown, but my family embraced downtown Detroit."

"It was an important part of my family's ethos. We'd go with my dad to his office and have lunch at the Traffic Jam & Snug (in Midtown), and we always went to the Eastern Market."



PR FOR THE SOUL

Marlo Fogelman, founder and CEO of Marlo Marketing in Boston, grew up in West Bloomfield. During her childhood, she often visited downtown Detroit, Midtown, and Eastern Market.

Just seeing what was going on in the city during the 1980s had an impact on Fogelman.

"I grew up in a relatively affluent neighborhood, so I was in this bubble. Being downtown as much as we were, I realized it was just the opposite — especially during that time," Fogelman says.

"My dad was very much into giving back. We belonged to Temple Beth El, and my dad was a member of the Brotherhood, and there were always turkey drives and other things going on so you could give back to those less fortunate."

Fogelman attended Andover High in Bloomfield Township, and by the time she moved on to Michigan State University in East Lansing, she was still thinking about a career in law.

"I studied pre-law and poli sci, and actually spent my junior year abroad in Paris," she says. "I never wanted to come back and I stayed as long as I possibly could have, but I missed taking the LSAT"

After Fogelman finished her senior year at Michigan State, she took the law school admission test, or LSAT. As a result, there was a one-year gap between college and law school.

"I worked for a law firm in Birmingham that did mesothelioma cases," she says. "I didn't really love it, but at that point I didn't know what else to do, and I was just kind of on this path."

The journey continued when Fogelman scored well on the LSAT, decided she wanted to live in either Washington, D.C., or Boston, and was accepted by the law schools at both American University in D.C. and Boston University.

So, how did she decide between the two cities?

"I don't know. I don't know. You're going to think I'm cuckoo," she reveals. "One of my essays for the law school at Boston University was that it was kismet that I was meant to live in Boston."

"I'd never been there, but must have lived there in a past life, and just had an affinity for it. I felt the same way about Paris before I went there for a year. There's just certain places that I feel a kinship for."

In 1997, Fogelman graduated from Boston University School of Law with a JD, as well as a master's degree in international relations. After passing the bar exams in both Massachusetts and New York, she found herself in a quandary.

"I really enjoyed going to law school," she says, "but I wasn't at all sure about how much I was going to enjoy the actual practice of law. So, I went through what I call my 'pre-life crisis,' and kind of just messed around for a couple of years."

She started out as an executive assistant at a tech startup, then joined the legal team at John Hancock Life Insurance Co.

"We called ourselves the Island of Misfit Lawyers. We either couldn't find jobs or we didn't know what we wanted to do," Fogelman says. "But I was doing the kinds of things that come naturally to me — creating relationships, throwing events. And then I helped a girlfriend with a project she was working on for The Big Dig."

The Big Dig was a massive road infrastructure undertaking that began in Boston in the early 1990s, and Fogelman and her girlfriend came up with a novel idea to promote the project.

"We did a Boys of The Big Dig calendar, and one for the girls, too," Fogelman explains. "It was meant to be an educational tool for the city. We did casting calls, contests with celebrity judges, and we got a ton of press. It was my first exposure to doing PR, and I didn't even know what I was doing. I was just doing something because it was fun and I liked it."

While Fogelman was still working on that project, she heard about an intriguing opportunity.

"The biggest PR firm in Boston was looking specifically for a lawyer because they were having trouble keeping anyone on their professional services accounts, things that aren't sexy and fun," she says. "They had 500 lawyers apply for that job, more than for any job they ever posted, and I got it."

Along with those boring, mundane accounts at her new job, Fogelman inherited a gigantic challenge in the retail coffee sector.

"Starbucks entered New England in 1995, and had been (with) the company that hired me for six months," she says. "They'd gone through five PR firms before, and they weren't happy. So it was like, 'Let's give Marlo the Starbucks account. We're going to lose it anyway, and when she messes it up, we'll fire her.'"

But Fogelman turned the account around in three months, singlehandedly, mostly because there was a lack of understanding of what the Starbucks product was.

By way of example, "New Englanders like their coffee sweet and creamy, right? So they're thinking, what's a latte? And why would I pay \$4 for it?"

Fogelman's marketing strategy was wide-ranging and multipronged. She helped open the first Starbucks store in Vermont by directly connecting to the surrounding community.

"I found a policing organization that impacted everybody in the entire city of Burlington, and we worked very closely on our relationship with them, asking what they needed, and following through.

"I feel like a lot of marketing people get a bad rap for just talking, excuse my French, bull*#@t, and never following through, but I walked the walk, right? And I think that was a big reason why I was able to infiltrate Starbucks."

She also made their product fun and accessible.

"What's big in New England? St. Patrick's Day. How do we play into that?" Fogelman asks. "We did coffee with green whipped cream. Then, we did a mint mocha latte with green whipped cream, and every



year we were allowed to get bigger and bigger — from one store, to a whole region, to the entire state.

"By the end, we were taking out full-page ads in *The Boston Globe* with this whole leprechaun latte thing."

It was at this point in her career that Fogelman took what seemed to be the obvious next step, and set out on her own.

"I started (my) company with Starbucks and three other clients," she says. "I never took out a business loan, and we made money from day one."

Garrett Harker, the proprietor of Eastern Standard and several other restaurants in Boston and the surrounding area, was one of Fogelman's first new clients.

"I first met Marlo in 2006, after I opened a 220-seat restaurant," Harker recalls. "The space was big, but I was a small-minded thinker, and Marlo had the vision and aspiration and expertise to tell the public how driven and committed we were.

"Marlo makes all of my people better, because her bar is so high, and her partnership and understanding of the brand has been a beacon over the last 20 years."

Fogelman was an aggressive self-promoter from the start, launching a newsletter for her clients, "Marlo Monthly," a precursor to the numerous social media options so prevalent today. As her venture prospered and grew, Fogelman didn't forget the lessons she learned from her father about giving back.

"We always took on pro bono work; it's just always been a part of who we've been," she says.

SHARED VALUE

Fogelman and one of her clients, Garrett Harker, who owns several restaurants, attend *Boston Magazine's* Most Influential Bostonians event in 2023.



BRAND IDENTITY

Marlo Marketing's clients include the Franklin Park Zoo, a 72-acre zoo that's part of the Emerald Necklace in Boston, Narragansett Lager, and Showcase Cinemas.

When the global financial crisis hit in 2008 — her company was four years old at the time — she lost a lot of business. But instead of firing people, she took the long-term view of keeping her team in place while reinforcing her high standards.

"Knowing what it takes to find people who meet those standards isn't easy," she maintains. "So, during that time, I paid my team out of pocket, and they stayed busy with a ton of pro bono work."

Fogelman and her team prevailed, and forged ahead for several years before another crisis emerged.

"We were at our height right before COVID-19," she says, "but our clients were all in hospitality, restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, hair salons, gyms, alcohol, (and) senior living real estate development. Our industries got destroyed, and we lost two-thirds of our clients overnight."

Fogelman also lost the majority of her staff. "We're much smaller now than we used to be," she says.

Whereas before 2020 she had around 43 employees, today Marlo Marketing has 16 workers.

But Fogelman and her streamlined team emerged from the pandemic with some significant insight.

"Two weeks after the lockdown, we were brought in to turn around Steak 'n Shake, and then opened a significant senior living community," she says. "I realized there's a lot of people in marketing making big salaries who don't know what they're doing."

The result was the launch of Marlo Marketing's Outsourced Solutions platform, which bills clients hourly for marketing guidance, sparing them the ordeal of hiring large agencies that may overcharge and underdeliver.

For clients like Harker and his restaurants, it was yet another example of Fogelman's determination and innate creative instinct that leads to success.

"Marlo is a long-term thinker and a short-term doer," Harker says. "When faced with existential challenges to our businesses, many of us were feeling sorry for ourselves. But Marlo has the gift to lay out a vision for her team and her clients. Then she acts with decisive enthusiasm, like no one else."



"I'M IN YPO, THE YOUNG PRESIDENT'S ORGANIZATION, AND I PROPOSED THAT WE DO OUR FIRST ANNUAL GLOBAL SUMMIT IN DETROIT, AND I VOLUNTEERED TO PLAN IT." — MARLO FOGELMAN

Lately, Fogelman is especially enthusiastic about a project with special meaning for her.

"I'm in YPO, the Young President's Organization, and I proposed that we do our first annual global summit in Detroit, and I volunteered to plan it," she says.

"Ninety-five percent of my client base is in the hospitality business network, and in October, I'll be bringing 150 CEOs of hotels, restaurants, alcohol companies, beverage companies, and food and beverage manufacturers to the city."

Fogelman's face lights up as she mentions her hometown.

"I go to a lot of conferences. Where do I go? Las Vegas, Atlanta, Miami, Chicago, (and) New York. It's the same stuff," she relays.

"Detroit should be part of that rotation, easy. What it offers is off the charts comparable to any other major city, and I'm really excited about bringing those people there, because the Detroit story is amazing." **IB**



MARKETING MILESTONE

Fogelman, center, and her team recently celebrated the company's 20th anniversary. In October, Fogelman will help host 150 CEOs from the food, beverage, and hospitality industries in Detroit.