



Season 6: International Marketing and Brand Management Episode 5

Stacie Berdan

*International Careers Expert
(Podcast Host)*

Jennifer Baaklini

*Director of Digital Strategy
FGS Global*

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Stacie Berdan:

Welcome to the global careers podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER – THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host!

In Season 6, we focus on the challenges and opportunities in global careers in marketing, communications and brand management. What are the rising trends and skills employers in the field are seeking in new hires? Join us as we hear from award-winning international marketing professionals as they share their stories working on some of the most iconic brands around the world. Today's guest is Jennifer Baaklini, Director of Digital Strategy at FGS Global – a communications and public affairs consultancy with offices in 27 cities around the world. Jennifer specializes in advising clients on digital strategy to advance public diplomacy and foreign policy objectives, particularly related to the Middle East. She has had global roles pretty much since she finished her undergraduate degree, including working at the US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and the Institute of International Education, where she worked on the prestigious Fulbright program. All of these roles in social media management. And I'm happy to say that she is a GW alumna, having earned her MBA in 2020 and was a Forte fellow too. Welcome, Jennifer. It's great to have you with us.

Jennifer Baaklini:

Thanks so much, Stacie. It's really great to be with you.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. So let's dive in. I love your career journey so far, working in global roles in the US to build your international resume, focusing on digital strategy. Can you give us a sense of what you do, for context?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Sure. So today, I'm Director of Digital Strategy, as you mentioned, at a communications and public affairs consultancy, so I primarily work with embassies in Washington, DC to advance their US public diplomacy objectives. So, specifically, in a digital role, I do advise on everything from editorial calendar, to digital tactics, and creative asset production, all the way down to social media and ad copy that can help these embassies reach their target audiences. In terms of what is public affairs, I wanted to kind of shed a light on that – public affairs is focused on the engagement between a government, business, or organization and the public. So, in the case of a foreign government, we're helping them communicate to the American public to help them build relationships and communicate their values and public diplomacy priorities, with the goal, of course, of shaping a better understanding, as well as helping to shape favorable views of that country.



Stacie Berdan:

Well, that's great. So, public affairs... but that's not what you studied necessarily, is that? I know you have an MBA and you started out in journalism. So how did you find your way down the Public Affairs path?

Jennifer Baaklini:

I think it is a bit of serendipity. So actually, I applied to work at the Institute of International Education, somewhat blindly, online, I was looking for social media jobs, I wanted to move to New York City, and ended up getting that job, which was kind of my big break, if you want to call it that. I moved to New York and worked on the Fulbright US Student Program. And, of course, the Fulbright Program is a State Department fellowship, to advance cross-cultural understanding between Americans and those abroad. So, I began to understand and be, kind of, in the world of Public Affairs through helping the State Department communicate the value of this really prestigious program and encouraging American students to apply.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful, and I love them. They published several of my books and, and wonderful organization that focuses on Fulbright, but also just encourages the exchange of students outside the US, to the US, and beyond for study abroad. And I know you studied abroad as an undergraduate, I know, at Penn State. You've spent time abroad in India, South Africa, Italy. Tell us, how did that help shape your thinking and your career?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, so I actually... what's kind of interesting is that I didn't have a passport until I was 19 when I was accepted into a study abroad semester, to go to Florence, Italy. So, I had been studying Italian at Penn State and followed that path to do a semester abroad in Italy. And this was during my sophomore year, so it was more of a liberal arts kind of touching on all different topics. But I think what was really inspiring to me, and I do remember a particular professor who specialized in cross-cultural psychology, really learning just that there was so much more out there than my suburban Pennsylvania town outside of Philadelphia, and just the diversity of the way that people live their lives. And I think that it really helped me to lose, or to become less, less judgmental and more open to other perspectives, and way of life. And that really translates to my career, I think, because I am really open to kind of digging in and understanding the why behind what motivates people from different countries and cultures. And I really enjoy helping to demonstrate that to other people that might misunderstand that culture. So, for example, the embassy, one of the embassies that I work with, I work with a lot of women diplomats from the Middle East, which in itself to an American audience is really surprising. And actually, most of the diplomats at this embassy are women. And it's really inspiring to kind of witness that aha moment when you're speaking with American colleagues or friends, or at public engagements for them to realize that and sort of see their perception shift.

Stacie Berdan:

I love that, what a great story. Thanks for sharing! So, I'm assuming you had not been outside the US if you didn't have a passport, then all of a sudden, you go, you expand your worldview, and now you're working with kind of like fighting stereotypical assumptions in a US audience, or maybe even others around the world. I just... I love that story. That's great. And all because you were open to it and willing to actually go somewhere, take a chance and learn, right?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah. And it's interesting, because my first time abroad was Italy for a semester. And then I wanted to go everywhere. So I did a case as international reporting class trip in South Africa... So this was shortly after the World Cup was held there, back in 2011, as you might remember that part back, and we had a chance to report on a story of our choice. And then, I also then pursued summer abroad in India, which was a service project. But we also



had an opportunity, of course, to engage with the culture, engage with the kids at the orphanage that we were volunteering at.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. That's great. And so, clearly, you're a great communicator, I can hear it, I can see it the way you're sharing your stories, and embracing things. And working in digital marketing, which has really changed a lot, right, over the last couple of years, opening up this this world of two-way communication. How do you begin to tackle that on a global scale?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, I think that communicating on a global scale can be really overwhelming, especially as social media in particular, which is what I specialize in, evolves and continues to change, and almost every company, organization or thought leader is on social media. So, there's a lot of conversations happening there, important conversations. And I think it's really important to focus specifically on who your target audiences are. I wanted to touch on, in terms of the dramatic change in the industry, specifically is the power of social media and digital ads. Because really, by throwing some money behind your communications message, you can reach the world. And I think it's really important to define your target audience for your client in this case, to make sure that your efforts are advancing the specific goals that you might have for your organization, or government, or client.

Stacie Berdan:

So that's interesting. So, do you see ads, social media ads, continuing, and maybe even expanding and growing in the future?

Jennifer Baaklini:

I think so. But I think that organic social media is also really important. And activities like this, like podcasts, or video content specifically, is really resonating with audiences. I think that authenticity is really important in digital communications. And it's not... I guess, utilizing the advertising or ad dollars to help advance messages that you really care about, and sort of being selective about what you put money behind is important.

Stacie Berdan:

So real complement integrative approach for sure... Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. What is the biggest change or challenge in globalization that you've witnessed in marketing in the past five years? And what advice do you have in dealing with it?

Jennifer Baaklini:

I think what's really inspiring... I know, this is a question about challenges, but what's inspiring to me is that there's often a single conversation that most people are talking about at any given time. And I think that really offers opportunities for companies to chime in if they do have something to say. Again, it's important to be selective, I think, about which conversations you join, but I find that really fascinating that we can sort of monitor the pulse of the public conversation, and that there are these trends globally, which really offers a lot of opportunities to get a sense of what people care about around the world. And I do think, even though there's a lot of chatter, negative comments, and things like that, that most of us really care about positive... sort of building a global community, and we care about people around the world. If you use the conflict in Ukraine, for example, I know a lot of people are paying attention to that, and really want to support the Ukrainian people in this and sort of offer support to them in any way that they can. So I think it's really interesting to kind of monitor the pulse of the global conversation.



Stacie Berdan:

So what kind of global marketing jobs are out there now, and what skills are necessary? You know, we've got a lot of listeners interested in pursuing different paths. What skills are necessary, do you think, in marketing today?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, I think I'm gonna focus probably on the communications, consultancy type of role, because there are a lot of communications consultancies, you know, working in a lot of different aspects, from digital marketing to public affairs, as I mentioned. So there's really a lot of opportunities to pursue a communications or marketing type role through these big companies. And working for a consulting agency does give you the opportunity to try out multiple clients. And with that said, I think this actually ties a bit to my GW MBA experience. And I think some students might, it might be a somewhat joke on the street with the students of calling GW group work or institution. But actually, I found that really valuable about my MBA experience. So in every class, we had to work with different groups of people to achieve a certain objective or complete a specific project for that class. And, of course, especially in my situation, I was working full time and go into class at night, or in some cases on the weekend. And you know, at first, you're like, ugh, this was a lot of work, I have to understand and meet a whole group of new people, learn how they work, and the way that they produce deliverables. And it really helped to build a sense of versatility and adaptability in learning to work kind of quickly with new and different groups. Because you don't actually get that experience very often in the working world, because often you have your set team of four to five people. But I really valued that experience. And I think that is really transferable to consulting agencies, because you might be kind of bouncing around to different clients and it really gives you a sense of diving right in and kind of being excited about meeting new people and learning new skills from them and how they do their work. Another thing actually, if you don't mind, that I would add about skill set – I think it's really important, especially in communications, to be attentive to detail, because that can really make or break other people's perception of your professionalism. And I think it's really important, especially working in social media, that you double, triple check or have someone else double-triple check for you. And check your work to make sure that all messages are clear and succinct and without typos.

Stacie Berdan:

Thank you for saying that. That is so important. I think that... I feared that had gone by the wayside, but it is so reassuring to me to hear that you are emphasizing it as important because everything you said is true and has been true for decades, right, especially in a consultancy. And one other thing I'd like to ask you about, just kind of follow on... those are great skills – versatility, adaptability, project management, attention to detail, being a great communicator... How about excellent writer, writing and overall communication skills? You started out as a journalist, has that helped you in your own? Do you see it as important for others?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, definitely. And I think, like you said, Stacie, you do worry about this, I guess basic sort of important tenant of communications and writing, falling to the side. But I think, again, it's really important and demonstrates, again, a professionalism and really helps you and your team really feel proud of the work that you're producing. And in terms of beginning my career as a journalist and studying journalism, I think what I really got out of that experience was curiosity, a sense of curiosity in learning other people's stories. And at the heart of building strong content for your organization or clients really is digging into what really makes people tick, or what is at the heart of whatever objective you might have.

Stacie Berdan:

Another follow up question regarding this working on a global scale. You have to balance, right, global and local market priority, sometimes different audiences with slightly different objectives. Can you share some examples of



when or how you handled this dynamic or smart tension, as I hear it's called now, within your organization or with clients?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, I think that sometimes, especially working with clients from another country, specifically, they might have a perception of how a message might be received by a US audience that isn't really in line with US public opinion, for example. So I think, helping to be able to explain to your client is about how a certain message might be received is really valuable, if that makes sense. So kind of being able to decipher the differences, the cultural differences in the way that messages are delivered, is really important. And I think this also kind of goes back to defining your target audience, because you're not often trying to reach the whole world, I guess, unless you're the UN or the COP 28, for example. So I think, kind of really focusing in on who your target audience is, and crafting your messaging to resonate with that specific audience is important, and don't try to, I guess, communicate with the entire world.

Stacie Berdan:

It's a very important point. Thanks for mentioning that. That's so true, right? You have to take on your one audience or your two audiences at a time. And you have worked, speaking of multiple audiences, you've worked for a variety of organizations, right? Nonprofits, US government, now as a consultant... tell us, kind of, about the differences, what you learned maybe from different ones, just again, so our listeners can get a sense of what it's like to work across a variety of types of industries.

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, this was a really good question. And I think kind of goes back to my interest and curiosity and learning about different cultures, which, really, these different types of organizations and sectors represent different cultures. And I have really found... followed my 'why' throughout the sort of pivots in my career. I think, kind of to break it down starting with the nonprofit world – I know Stacie has a lot of experience with IIE – and after studying abroad three times I was really passionate about what IIE does, really spreading the good word about study abroad and how important it is to building a global perspective and preparing you for a career where you kind of understand different policies or different perspectives that might be coming from around the world. And it's... there's of course, plenty of nonprofits that are working on many different topics. And my advice, really, if you're working in a communications role, you're never going to be happy unless you're communicating a message that you believe in. So I think it's really important to do a test, you know, with yourself before taking any type of job to really get a sense of if you believe in what you're going to be communicating on a daily basis. I think it's really hard to produce strong content, or written materials or communications materials like speeches, if you're not, you don't really believe in what you're communicating.

Stacie Berdan:

Okay, so that's great, making sure that you are passionate or at least believe in the messages that you're communicating, definitely for a nonprofit. But is that the same working for the Government and private sector as well?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yeah, I think sort of what I mentioned, I guess we'll start with talking about work in the US Government, it was really a privilege to be, to engage with diplomats on the US Government side, and now in my role as a consultant – diplomats on the foreign government side. So I think there's really a commonality and sense of purpose in, you know, advancing public diplomacy and cross-cultural understanding on both sides. So I think when I shifted to this role from the US Government side, I think that not everyone really understood why I was making the change to work with clients from foreign governments. But as I mentioned, I think that it's a lot of these communication skills



are transferrable. And in a way, I do feel like there is a level of diplomacy that I represent myself as consulting foreign governments and communicating with the US audience. In terms of working as a consultant there, it's really important to build a level of trust with your client. And I've been really lucky to have really great clients that, you know, also want to learn about the US and, you know, what it's like to live here, what it's like to raise a family here. So, I think that it's really interesting to communicate, work to communicate the things that you believe in.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, yeah, that's really neat. Because I like what you said, which is you've got a skill, right, you've got some skills – marketing, communications, digital strategy, social... and you've done that, used those and applied those in a not-for-profit, for the US Government, and now a consultancy. And so, you can really actually take your skills and the challenge will be, I guess, in the marketplace, is to actually figure out how to actually leverage what you've done for one at another. And that would be... that's a that's a really interesting kind of shift to make. But I think it is definitely doable. You've clearly done it and seemed to be excelling. So that's wonderful. I want to go back and actually ask you a question a little bit more about the Fulbright, because I don't think they're talked about enough. I don't think enough people understand it. And you actually worked on that with IIE. Can you tell us about, don't just give us a little mini commercial or store promotion for Fulbright, why should students pursue it? What are the benefits, whatever you'd like on that?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Well, lucky you, I used to lead all of the webinars on the Fulbright US Student Program, telling students how to apply and also presenting at college campuses around the country on the program. And I'm just smiling kind of thinking about it. I, every Fulbrighter I've met has really, you know, been a bright spark. And I've always enjoyed talking with them about their experience and their excitement about kind of advancing an important, you know, aspect of moving society and culture forward. And so, the Fulbright US Student Program does offer post graduate. So after you have completed your undergraduate degree you can apply, and a myth is that you have to apply when you just finished your undergrad degree, but you can actually apply for the Fulbright US Student Program throughout your early career. So if you do start to have work experience, and then feel the Fulbright calling you, you can apply. And this is about a year abroad in another country, either doing a research project or teaching English. And then there also are some graduate degrees that you can pursue through Fulbright and Fulbright funding. And it really gives you the flexibility to, you know, live in another country for a full year and dive deep into a topic that, a research topic that you might be passionate about, or kind of focus more on being a cultural diplomat and representing the US in a classroom abroad and connecting with students and really focusing on that cultural experience. And I think what's really inspiring about the Fulbright Program is that you do get to connect with the embassy in your host country. And also, which I think is inspiring, especially if you're interested in pursuing a career in diplomacy for the US Government, just that exposure to the US foreign policy initiatives and professionals I think is really inspiring and kind of like a crash course and whether that's right for you.

Stacie Berdan:

Wonderful program, thank you for sharing that. And great plug. Hopefully listeners do that, because I didn't know that it was also throughout your early career. So that is a wonderful way to pivot. Many people think they have to just go do a graduate degree – they don't, they can pivot maybe through Fulbright or going abroad. I love it. Jennifer, is there a piece of advice that you were given at some point throughout your career that you did not take? Why?

Jennifer Baaklini:

Yes. So I think it's an important message that I'd like to share with listeners. So this piece of advice was to stay in a role that I was no longer learning, or that was no longer serving me. And of course, the deliverer of this advice, didn't know these other aspects, that I felt like I wasn't learning anymore in this position, and, you know, maybe



came from a good place. But I think there can sometimes be pressure to stay at a job, that you know in your heart, you're no longer you know, learning, which I think is the most important part of your career is to continue learning. And I think if I wasn't so confident in my decision, because this advice was also given to me when I was thinking about having a family and I was already really nervous and kind of anxious about changing jobs at that time by you know, was going to get pregnant. And I think that it's just important to follow your gut and believe in yourself, if you are sensing that it's time to make a change.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great, wonderful advice. And yes, learning throughout our careers, for sure. But definitely in the first 5, 10, 15 years, absolutely. There's a supersonic kind of learning that takes place. So good for you that you followed your gut, and you did what you wanted. I love that. Well, it's... we're coming to the end of our program here. But before we wrap up, I wanted to know if there's anything you'd like to add, maybe something that I didn't ask that you want to share with listeners?

Jennifer Baaklini:

I would like to highlight the Forte Fellowship, which I was a Forte Fellow when I got my MBA at GW. So GW is one of the participating universities across the US that does offer fellowships to women who want to pursue an MBA. And Forte was formed in the early 2000s, when there was research that gender equity had been achieved in law and medical degrees, but only 28% of MBA students were women. So their goal is to get more women into MBA programs, and, in essence, more women at the table. So I was really inspired by this experience. And I like to highlight fellowships and opportunities like this, because of course, all of these experiences, particularly educational experiences, do cost money, especially in the US. So it's really important to kind of know what resources are available to you. And I had the opportunity to go to the GW or go to represent GW at the Forte Conference, which is an annual conference that they have for women in business. And that was a really inspiring experience. Again, that helped me feel confident in the fact that I would be able to have a career and also, of course, have a family. So I just wanted to give a little plug for Forte.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. Yeah, wonderful, Forte fellowship, and so many opportunities. Thanks for sharing that. And thanks for spending a little bit of your time today. I know you're very busy. And I really appreciate your taking the time today, Jennifer to actually share your experience with us.

Jennifer Baaklini:

Thanks so much. It was fun.

[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!