

In between the lines

Julie Roehm
interviewed by
Carrie Kerpen

WORK *IT*

SECRETS FOR SUCCESS
FROM THE BOLDEST
WOMEN IN BUSINESS

CARRIE KERPEN

CEO OF COMMUNITY LUNCH MEALS FOR ALL OF THE PEOPLE
ALL THE SPECIAL LUNCHES

Scribd.

Julie Roehm was one of the powerful women interviewed by Carrie Kerpen for her book *Work It*. Please find here an excerpt of the chapter Carrie wrote about her encounter with Julie.

[Here is a link to Carrie's book website.](#)

Everyone of us will stumble at some point in our careers, but I can recall no woman who experienced one as publicly as Julie Roehm.

Moments before Julie Roehm, now the Chief Storyteller at SAP, walked into my office to be interviewed for my podcast, I did a little googling. Of course, I was aware of Julie's story-- how she was a top executive in the notoriously male-dominated auto industry before she unjustly lost a senior leadership position at Walmart after just 10 months -- but I wasn't aware of just how viciously she was attacked by the press. I couldn't imagine coming back from that kind of public vitriol. And yet, here she was, head held high walking into my office.

Just to catch you up on the story in case you're not up to speed on the drama of the advertising world, Julie was hired by Walmart as the Senior Vice President of Marketing Communications-- and she was specifically hired to fight off the sudden and aggressive rise of the incomparably cool, stylish discount retailer Target. By all accounts, this was a smart hire. After all, Julie was cool and stylish-- and she had reinvented the brands she'd worked on before. Whether she was successfully branding the Ford Focus for the under 30 crowd by giving them away to celebrities like P. Diddy, or reinventing Dodge with the sexy "Grab Life By The Horns" tagline-- Julie was a risk taker, and her risks usually paid off in a big way.

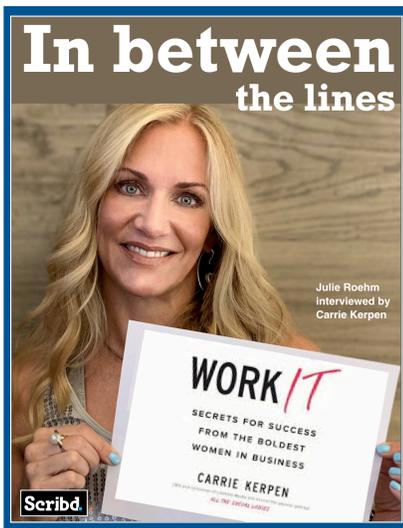
And so, when the darling of the auto industry-- an industry that oozed sex and sizzle, picked up her family and moved over to Bentonville Arkansas for Walmart-- she didn't have the best feeling. Just 10 months later she was fired for "improper conduct"-- accused of accepting gifts (dinner, a glass of wine...) from agency partners (you can't accept even a tissue from someone when you work at Walmart). The firing was loud, and it was public--- her emails released, photos, and lawsuits and counter lawsuits galore. It was, by all accounts a nightmare.

So was this all because Julie was an attractive woman who sold "sexier ideas" than Walmart was ready for? Many thought so. Sergio Zyman, Coca-Cola's former CMO, spoke to Fast Company about a trip he took to meet and counsel Julie after the incident. "Walmart wanted to wear a pair of high heels, and Julie was high heels," says Zyman, who made marketing history himself with the 1980s New Coke debacle. "When they put on the high heels, they said, No, this is too difficult to me, my feet hurt. Then the high heels became the problem."

So how did Julie bounce back from this kind of humiliating failure? Time, hard work, and most of all, perspective. She told me the tale of how she started consulting again- how the contacts and colleagues she had at companies like Sports Illustrated, launched her consulting career while she rebuilt her confidence and a successful business that she ran for 5 years. During this time she was courted by several companies but waited for the perfect fit which ultimately landed her a senior position at SAP. But what she really talked about was what she learned.

“Carrie”, she said, looking at me with an intense clarity. “I learned that culture eats strategy for lunch. I could have been the Michael Jordan of marketing and it wouldn’t have mattered there-- because it wasn’t a culture fit. I did not belong at Wal Mart-- my personal energy, my speed, my style. I could have recognized that immediately, but I ignored my gut warning signs.”

That perspective helped her a ton in her career, but it was also the perspective of her son that helped her bounce back. “‘Mom’ he said to me. ‘If you hadn’t taken that job and gone through that, our whole life would have been different. And I like our life.’ This is the way to look at the world-- you can look back at the ugliest times in your life and turn it around to see what about it made you happy and grateful, and got you where you are today. If you can get through it and find that meaning? Then you can be better tomorrow.”



Julie Roehm