

The Cart Becomes the Horse



Megan Smith-Gill



Black Gold, Bluestone and...Polar Bears?

All Things Gault

Story by Susan Heller Photos by Neil Landino

Yes indeed, that triptych encompasses the ongoing legacy of the Gault family. And you can throw in the Emancipation Proclamation while you're at it. Confused? Stick with me and all will be made clear.

150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln signed into law the above, earth-shaking executive order. From our current time frame, that feels like such an incredibly long time ago, yet Robert Gault began what would turn out to be a century-and-a-half business odyssey that very same year in the town of Westport, Connecticut.

As you can imagine, there is some serious history here: world wars,

black gold oil booms and busts, innovations and inventions galore. It's an amazing story spanning multiple generations, which I am not going to share with you. Because in this, their official 150th year in business, the tale has [already] been beautifully told in words and pictures and is on display at the Westport Historical Society.

You should go see it. And bring the kids. Or view the presentation at: <http://gault150.com>.

But wait. First, let me tell you about the next ten and a half decades, because this becomes a story about you, your kids and your kids' kids. Also, there is a bit of conspiracy theory you might want to know about.

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There are plans afoot that involve an attempt to take over the planet. One of the ringleaders is Megan Smith-Gill. More on that coming up.

The first thing you need to know about Megan is that she is living, breathing testament to the like-attracts-like principle. If her moniker wasn't already encroaching on the 140 character limit, she would probably be known as Megan Smith-Gill-Gault. She comes to the energy and stone party with serious agency-marketing credentials, a love of family and a titanic work ethic that could only be matched by the family of Gault—and by that I mean every single person who works for any one of their five companies. (Google [the name] Gault and any blizzard, thunderstorm, hurricane, or flood coverage for clear evidence of their core values and capabilities.)

Don't get me wrong, I'm not inferring perfection. I have no doubt that, like any family, they have their dramas and dust-ups. But when you look around at what passes for integrity, accountability, even innovation (or rather the lack thereof) in the name of success, this is pretty heartening stuff.

Magic, Mythology, Sales & Marketing

Megan Smith-Gill joined Gault in their 145th year. Up to that point they hadn't seen a need for a marketing professional. With five generations of Gaults at the helm, their business focus had evolved with the times. However, while finding resonance with current market trends and customer needs is a good thing, you also have to be able to engage in—for lack of a better term—quantum thought-leaps. Things are moving that fast these days as most everyone can attest to. Current company president Sam Gault saw in Megan someone who could join the team and impact the brand. And in Sam, Megan saw a leader who is entrepreneurial and someone she considers “a true visionary.”

Bingo.

Their shared goal is to utilize intelligent, thoughtful strategy that is flexible enough to flow with real world events and will continue

step-by-step to increase the outreach of the company. There are two definitions of the word outreach that apply here. One is broadening their already sizable philanthropic activities which include education; the other is exploring anything and everything that might be a good fit for their business portfolio to ensure that the next 150 years work as well as the first 150 have. Creating a win/win for the ensuing generations of Gault and importantly to them, the community of people they serve.



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There was of course—as in all good narratives—a sizable stumbling block to be overcome. It will come as no surprise to you that two of Gault's main industries, energy and stone, are traditional male bastions. “Both worlds are very male-dominated,” Megan says. “I am almost always the only female sitting around with the executive team. So many people in these industries, especially energy, grew up in it. Their dad had a truck or a company and it's been handed down. So not only did I not grow up in it, I had zero industry experience.” Addressing the mythology of historical bias required Megan to play to her strengths: “I use who I am and what I've learned to my advantage. I use it to be heard and to stand out because my ideas and my voice are so different.”

In case you're worried about how our heroine was going to find her way in this new, client-side world she had become part of, let me point out that she was originally hired as Director of Marketing at Gault and is now Chief Marketing Officer.

In June of this year she

was an invited speaker for the first ever Women in Energy Summit in Manchester, New Hampshire. She has been honored as one of Fairfield County's “40Under40”. She gets up at 4:00 a.m. to handle emails and planning because it is her finger taking the pulse of all five companies under the Gault umbrella and she wants hang time with her family. She is smart, ambitious and has a very keen sense of what is actually at stake here. “Energy is a really challenging industry,” she explains.

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Megan Smith-Gill and Sam Gault
at the Westport Historical Society



“When you think about it on a global level, it is such a critically important business for literally every person on the planet. That is a massive concept and a massive responsibility. I work in an industry that is that important.” Megan also notes that on a very hyper-local level, unless you are ready to move at the speed of light you are going to be left behind. Speaking of greased lightning, how cohesive and capable does a team need to be to launch a turn-key, brand new division in a matter of weeks? I’ll let you choose the adjective, but suffice it to say that under Sam’s leadership the Gault Standby Generator Division was conceived and created in February of this year in response to the reality of climate change (yes, that is my phrase; theirs would probably be “market signal” or “weather volatility”) and the impact that power outages have had on their customers.

When Megan talks about working with Sam, her respect for him is evident. It isn’t a matter of him being her boss; it is about his ability to take risks, to be willing to step outside the company’s previous comfort zone and then pass the benefit on to others. Case in point: Sam’s daughter was having a very tough time with allergies and asthma. The family tried remediating their home every which way they could think of, but nothing worked. Finally, they tried an air-quality system designed to reproduce the quality of atmosphere found only at higher mountain elevations. The difference was amazing and the next thing you know, Sam launched Gault Energy’s Breathe Easy Education Campaign which offers guidance on how to eliminate or control pollution sources within your home.

The Mark of Megan

If it weren’t for the hours she keeps, I might be inclined to be envious of the wicked fun she’s having working for, with, and alongside the legacy of Gault. “We’ve done a good job as a company,” Megan acknowledges, “educating our homeowners about how they can reduce their carbon footprint. But I wanted to take that a step further.” To my mind, the results of that intention are grounded in distinctly feminine sensibilities, which means uniting creative exploration with powerhouse marketing know-how. Together, Megan and Sam stepped up their game. Consider the following sample of activities and outreach:

- The Green Office Challenge – A five-week program designed to help local businesses

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reduce their carbon footprint. Somewhere around sixty businesses entered the competition. All of them came out winners having discovered just how much money could be saved while doing the right thing.

- The Recycle Roundup – Consumers know never to put electronics in the trash or leave them at a dump. Gault provided a way for people to responsibly dispose of laptop computers, DVD and VCR players, cell phones and video game consoles.
- The Oldest Boiler Contest – Also known as creative philanthropy. The winning boiler was 113 years old and on its last legs. It was replaced free of charge with a \$7,500 state-of-the-art boiler.

Hallelujah, What Customers Don’t Know, and World Domination

I’ve spent a lot of time shooting creative videos for corporations as well as writing speeches and presentations, so I can assure you that the buzz phrase “core-competency” has had more than its share of nine lives. It was oftentimes as much wishful thinking as it was PR spin. What earns a hallelujah from me is that Gault now considers “conservation” a core competency, and they’re walking their talk. That precept is behind

everything they do. From utilizing permeable pavers—an example of green masonry which is an ecologically responsible use of materials and building methods—to careful consideration of the impact shipping has on the environment. Yes, they obtain their bluestone or feldspathic greywacke (and they say geologists don’t have a sense of humor) from Pennsylvania, and it happens to be the most cost effective location. But the reality is, and what customers don’t know, says Megan, “is that even if the lowest price was in California, we would still buy it from Pennsylvania. We are always mindful that we are part of a bigger picture here.” That critical differentiator is, to my mind, elevated business intelligence. Short-term greed as practiced by companies or corporations that know better is just staggeringly unintelligent. Why would you want to sabotage your future earnings? Why wouldn’t you want to emulate and duplicate the success Hamilton Development (Gault’s real estate company) is experiencing with their green-space creation of Saugatuck Center? By success I mean an ongoing revenue-stream for the company and benefits for the community—like riverfront access, new shops, new apartments, restaurants and sports—with everything as Mother Earth



friendly as possible.

That said, I've yet to explain Megan's intention to adjust, convert, revolutionize and otherwise transform the world. It is a simple three-step process which begins at a grass-roots level educating customers, one by one. Then companies are brought on board. Finally and most powerfully, she seeks to instill the children. Cue the Polar Bears.

Not because they're fun and fuzzy, but because global warming is transforming their world from a solid to a liquid. A poignant and scary reality for the bears and for humans that all kids seem to understand right away. Grown-ups not so much, certainly not as fast. So Sam and Megan charted a decade-long course in conjunction with the non-profit Polar Bears International. Their journeys intersect where the bears live in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. Fairfield County Green Teens are selected to join scientists and researchers on-site to witness and to learn what is being done, and how much there is left to do. They return from the experience with the title of Arctic Ambassador. "That is much more than a lofty name," Megan assures me. "That teen will for the next year and hopefully forever—but definitely while they are under our aegis—speak to elementary school children and help inspire behavioral changes."

This is a concerted and passionate intent to change the vernacular. "Just like wearing seat-belts is now part of our vocabulary," Megan says, "or the fact that you would never put your child in a car without a car-seat, we are trying to change the mind-set about energy conservation so that it becomes the normal standard to which everyone

subscribes to." So for their 150th anniversary, Gault Energy and Stone is sponsoring a powerful exhibition called "Canary in the Coal Mine: The Plight of the Polar Bear" at the Westport Library. It will be there from August 16 through December 1, 2013. Take your kids, friends, family and talk it up to everyone you know. This is about your birthright.

Just like their ancestors, Sam Gault and Megan Smith-Gill (Gault) take the long view: they want the next five generations of everybody's kids to inherit the legacy of the planet that was bequeathed to them.

Susan Heller has earned a reputation for excellence as a Writer, Ghost-writer, Producer and Director. She also designs and directs TV spots, advertising, video, and multimedia presentations when she's not writing speeches or helping other professionals hone their public speaking skills.