

New York Stage Experience Puts Executive Coach's Clients Front and Center

Laura Darius Launches West Coast Office for 15-Year-Old Business

BY KATIE WEEKS

"Business is theater" is the mantra of executive coach and image consultant Laura Darius.

The feisty 5-foot, 2-inch native New Yorker has started a West Coast branch of Darius Communications Inc., her 15-year-old firm.

"I believe it's important to put on a costume for business — altering one's character on the stage of business. You're not giving up yourself, but tweaking your image," she said.

Darius, who studied speech and theater at Brooklyn College has a softened East Coast edginess — at least in her business persona. She declined to give her age.

Her ability to morph her personality to relate to her audience, has helped her garner an impressive list of clients, most of which are in the pharmaceutical industry.

She has worked with some of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, including Bristol-Meyers Squibb and GlaxoSmithKline.

Aggressive, yet refined, Darius' confident style is helping to earn her a respected image among health care and biotech executives.

Local Politicians

Locally, Darius works with executives at Amylin Pharmaceuticals Inc., Gen-Probe Inc., and Sharp HealthCare, among others, on skills like presentation and accent reduction.

She said she is also beginning to consult for local politicians, none of whom she named.

"To be able to deliver criticism or feedback and have someone embrace it — that is a unique skill," said Jamee Lynn Smith, a former public relations executive at Sharp HealthCare who now is associate director of marketing and communications at San Diego Hospice & Palliative Care.

Smith honed her presentation skills with the help of Darius, who has also worked with other Sharp executives.

Smith said she learned to "command more of a presence" in meetings by speaking slower and maintaining a steady tone of voice.

Darius has changed the name of her firm over the years to reflect different focuses.

In the 1980s and 1990s, she employed up to 10 people, but once she realized her name recognition was largely holding up the business, she decided to go it alone in 1992.

In addition to accent reduction and executive coaching, Darius acts a personal shopper, even once leading a mission to find a suitable bra for a plus-size scientist to wear while she delivered a presentation.

Darius also offers help with clutter, personal/professional life balance, executive presence and communication style modifications.

She prides herself on quick diagnosis and subtle adjustments that she says could make or break a promotion, a financial deal, a new client or result in increased sales.

Revenues

Darius charges \$300 to \$400 per hour.

Courtesy of Laura Darius

Executive coach and image consultant Laura Darius works with many area biotech executives to improve their ability to give public presentations and upgrade their wardrobes.



She said her business has doubled over the last five years, and today her revenues are "more than \$100,000 per year."

She has been working with Gen-Probe's Jerzy Macioszek, associate director of product development, for two years on accent reduction.

Macioszek, who is Polish, has been in the United States 10 years. He taught himself English.

Macioszek said, "If someone misunderstands you (in the life sciences industry, especially), there's certainly a high risk."

Macioszek and Darius recently gathered for a refresher session, spouting vowel sounds at one another while Macioszek watched his image on a DVD player.

Darius records the sessions so clients can measure improvements.

Macioszek said his supervisor and co-workers have complimented his improved speech, though he joked that at least one colleague said his accent was part of his charm.

Darius such training activities are less expensive than hiring new employees.

Darius, who speaks French, has a minor in music from the University of Wisconsin. She graduated from the High School of Music & Art in New York City.

She has been interviewed on CNN, ABC, NBC and featured in the New York Times, Vogue, Cosmopolitan and Harper's Bazaar.



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Darius said she moved to San Diego three years ago to be near her family but still flies between San Diego and New York, where she maintains an office for Darius Communications. Darius said she works 25 hours per week.

Darius said if San Diego wants to be a larger player in business, it needs a wardrobe boost.

"People here pride themselves on being so casual," she said. "I really think they need to up the ante — instead of the flip-flops, Hawaiian shirts and wrinkled Dockers."

Among her advice to "America's Finest

City," is that biotech executives should not be so humble.

"They ... don't realize how crucial their missions are," she said. "(Even small biotechs) should see themselves as potential players as opposed to garage operations. It makes an impression on their potential investors."

Darius said a visual change is the easiest way to alter others' perceptions.

She believes in "investment dressing" — buying the best quality clothes one can afford.

Darius' niche in the life sciences has helped her to gain a share of a crowded market.

James Canfield, president and chief operating officer of La Jolla-based **Renaissance Executive Forums**, which has 40 U.S.

locations, noted there are "hundreds" of executive coaches in San Diego.

Most don't have more than six people, he said. Canfield employs 15 locally.

Renaissance sponsors monthly meetings of executives who pay fees to be members, who meet with a facilitator to share ideas.

Most members are from medium-size companies, he said, with revenues from \$1 million to \$100 million.

The 12-year-old firm's clients come from technology, business services and maintenance and construction.

Canfield admitted that a return on investment for money spent professional coaching is difficult to measure. "Our goal is to move them from where they are to where they want to be."

Darius said her services are more comprehensive and personalized and that her clients see improvements after only a few hours.

"I do everything from what extends from the mouth to what kind of purse a woman carries," she said. "There is a monetary benefit to this because they are better accepted in their companies, bringing in a better image and ultimately increasing revenues."