

## Reputation Leadership

An Interview with Joan H. Walker,  
Executive Vice President-Corporate Relations, Allstate Insurance Company

**EDITORS' NOTE** Joan Walker is a member of Allstate's senior leadership team. Before joining Allstate in 2005, Walker was Executive Vice President of Marketing and Communications for Quest Communications International. Previously, she was Senior Vice President-Global Public Affairs for Pharmacia. She had a similar role at Monsanto before the company's merger with Pharmacia & Upjohn. Walker was Senior Vice President of Corporate Communications at



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Ameritech from 1996 to 1999. She earlier served as a partner in the Bozell Sawyer Miller group and in governmental and educational roles. Walker currently serves as a member of the board of trustees of the Arthur W. Page Society, the Insurance Education Institute, the Business Civic Leadership Center, WTTW-11, The Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, and the Chicago Architecture Foundation. Walker received a bachelor's degree in sociology from Douglass College at Rutgers University and a master's degree in sociology from Rutgers University.

**COMPANY BRIEF** The Allstate Corporation ([www.allstate.com](http://www.allstate.com)) is the nation's largest publicly held personal lines insurer, serving approximately 16 million households through its Allstate, Encompass, Esurance, and Answer Financial brand names. Allstate offers insurance products (auto, home, life, and retirement) and services through Allstate agencies, independent agencies, and Allstate exclusive financial representatives, as well as via [www.allstate.com](http://www.allstate.com) and 1-800 Allstate®. The Allstate Foundation, Allstate employees, agency owners, and the corporation provided \$28 million in 2011 to thousands of nonprofit organizations and important causes across the United States.

**You have been successful in senior roles at leading companies. Would you provide an overview of your career progression and highlight your current leadership role at Allstate?**

I have been fortunate to work in a variety of corporations and industries – telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, government, education, and now, insurance – and each was an educational and empowering experience. I learned to manage increasingly complex operations, effectively use and delegate authority, and move the strategy of the company forward through reputation leadership.

We live and die these days by how we communicate, and at Allstate, I see my role as driving both excellence and success – in my department and throughout the company.

**Has sufficient progress been made with opportunities for women at senior levels of business? What more can be done to facilitate that?**

The opportunities have grown and right now we have a small group of incredible women as CEOs of some of America's best companies – Meg Whitman at HP, sisters Denise Morrison of

Campbell Soup and Maggie Wilderotter at Frontier Communications, and Ursula Burns at Xerox; even IBM has a woman CEO in Virginia Rometty. No one doubts anymore that a woman can do the job.

But there are still hurdles. Women are far more likely to be SVP of HR and far less likely to be SVP of manufacturing. It's still unusual to see a woman CFO. It's gradually changing, but some barriers of the past – most purely psychological – remain.

**How critical is diversity and inclusion to the success and culture of Allstate?**

My degrees are in sociology, so I came into the business world with a great appreciation for how diversity can play an incredible role in the success of a corporation.

I am proud to say that diversity permeates the Allstate culture and is a central part of our business strategy. Inclusive diversity is one of our core values – the collective mixture of all of our differences in our workforce, marketplace, and community.

**Would you highlight the role of reputation leadership in terms of driving business results, strengthening brand, and bolstering the customer value proposition?**

When we say, "You're in good hands with Allstate", it is not just an advertising slogan – Everything we do as a corporation, every customer contact, and handling every claim, has to back up that statement. It is who we are.

Reputation leadership is more granular than ever. Our reputation is only as good as the collective tweets and blog posts that now influence people's thinking and buying decisions.

**How critical is corporate responsibility/community engagement to the culture of Allstate and is it important that these efforts align with your business strategy?**

Trust is fundamental in our commitment to customers. It is not simply given; trust has to be earned. You have to build it over time and the

best way is by being responsible to the communities in which we live and work.

There's a broad definition for corporate responsibility and community engagement at Allstate, from our network of 12,000 agency owners across America helping at the food bank or cancer walk to our enterprise commitment to reduce teen driving fatalities by 50 percent between 2005 and 2015.

Just like sales or profits, we have goals for positively impacting our communities. It is that important.

**How have the global communications and marketing functions evolved and how much of an impact has technology had on those roles?**

Communicating via social media is now the norm in virtually everyone's communications profile, from the individual to the corporation. Things go viral at a dynamic pace and we devote much time and effort to monitoring and engaging customers and the public online.

From a marketing perspective, we are able to tailor communications to the individual customer. With our mobile apps, customers are carrying Allstate around in their pockets. We have become more than ever a part of their lives.

**How do you measure the success of your communications efforts and how critical is it to put metrics in place to track impact?**

Measurement and analysis are indispensable components of reputation leadership. We created a highly analytical, precise, and predictive model looking at specific stakeholders – customers, employees, agency owners, investors, policy makers, and opinion leaders – and giving us actionable results. We are in a position to understand precisely what they expect from the company and what we can do to meet their expectations.

**With your vast experience as a leader in communications, what do you enjoy most about the role and how has it remained so fresh for you?**

It has undergone an amazing evolution in a very short time. Everything today is based on a new communications model that wasn't even imagined when I was growing up. Users are empowered like never before – just look at how the Twitter community, not its developers or marketers, turned the hashtag into one of the most powerful online tools.

I am a very action-oriented person. I am never bored and I can never be complacent. Something new is going to happen with every tomorrow and I want to be involved in making it happen. ●