

In her own words: "Whatever you touch, do it well."

When Karen Kelly delivered newspapers as a young girl, she covered her route each day with the same thought in mind: "Do your job the very best you can whether people are watching you or not." These days, she is still delivering a solid work performance as a Retail Sales Manager for Kraft Canada on the Loblaws Companies Limited account.

"Performance" is a key word in Karen's background. Her first inkling of enjoying the spotlight came when she participated in school plays and public-speaking competitions as a young girl. An avid high school athlete, she also had visions of being a trainer for a pro sports team. But a high school guidance counsellor persuaded her that studying human kinetics at university was a dead end, so Karen opted instead for a general arts degree at the University of Guelph. Taking a wide variety of arts courses, she figured, might help her better focus her academic efforts.

But before long she was re-thinking her choice. By the second term of first year, she realized that she was no closer to deciding on an area of concentration. It was time, she decided, to investigate that physical education degree. Several letters of application later — all the while cracking the books hard to raise her grades — Karen was accepted by Queen's, McMaster and Toronto. Since the Queen's course offered a concurrent program yielding two degrees, Karen chose Queen's.

A hectic couple of years followed, as Karen studied and participated enthusiastically on a

number of intramural teams. Then in 1995 she landed a one-of-a-kind summer job — a switch from her usual waitressing or assembly-line summer jobs — that changed the way she looked at work. Working for the Frontenac, Lennox & Addington Health Unit in Kingston, Karen was charged with setting up a bicycle safety program from scratch. She created lesson plans, signed on local sponsors, widely advertised the bike camp and taught the kids. It was highly rewarding work, topped off by the satisfaction of watching children come to the camp knowing next to nothing about bike safety and leaving as confident bike riders.

As always, Karen gave 100 percent to her work, and even though it was short-term, the job reinforced for her the notions that she loved working with people, speaking in public and being the centre of attention. At the time, Karen strongly believed that it was important to be good at everything she did so she could keep all her options open. As she puts it, "It's important to keep all doors open and to network whenever you can."

Her accomplishments did not go unnoticed. Karen and her supervisor were given an award by the Kingston Safety Council for innovative programming in the fall of 1995. After that came an invitation to give a presentation about the program to the First Annual Ontario Injury Prevention Conference in London in November 1995.

Back in the physical education program, Karen gradually recognized that the realities of being a sports trainer were not what she had imagined. After taking a wide variety of courses, she preferred the humanities to the sciences and did

not want to pursue a post-graduate degree in science.

Graduating in 1996, she returned to the Health Unit for the summer, this time to expand the successful bike camp. She hired additional instructors and tripled the camp's enrolment. When the job wrapped up at summer's end, Karen moved to Cobourg, searching for work as a health educator. A short-term contract at the Kingston Health Unit in the winter of 1997 was followed by a move to St. Catherine's. Again, waitressing supplemented the search for work until one day in September 1997 she received notice of a job opening through the Graduate Registry System operated by Career Services at Queen's. The advertisement called for an energetic, outgoing individual to take on a five-week marketing contract.

Karen still remembers the unique interview that landed her the job. She sat at one end of a very long table facing four interviewers and a video camera while answering questions about how she loved to eat her Kraft Dinner.

Picked as one of a three-member Kraft Dinner crew that was assigned the task of travelling around Ontario extolling the virtues of Kraft Dinner, Karen also scored the job of emcee at the Eaton Centre kick-off of the tour. She was back in the spotlight, travelling and working for 35 very long days without a break. Travelling in a Humvee that criss-crossed central Ontario, Karen joined her teammates in three presentations a day, coaxing grocery store customers to wax eloquent about Kraft Dinner. It was a grinding schedule, but Karen — true to form — threw herself into the job.

At the end of the tour, she faced a dilemma. The marketing company that had hired her in the first place now offered her a permanent position, but

Kraft expressed interest also. Gambling on her ability to persuade Kraft that she was the right person for them, she turned down the marketing job and concentrated on her interviews with North America's largest food company. She was rewarded with the offer of a sales job in the St. Catherine's area.

After five months as a sale representative, she was promoted to account manager for two regional accounts, Biway and Bargain Shop at the Kraft sales office in Mississauga. One year later, in July 1999, Karen was promoted to Customer Category Manager on a national account, Zellers. In April 2000, she moved to Kraft's highest profile national account — Wal-Mart — and, most recently, she was promoted to be one of Kraft's Retail Sales Managers for their Loblaws Companies Limited account.

By now an experienced businesswoman, Karen still found the first year at national office bittersweet. Very long hours were the norm as she concentrated on learning the ropes and building relationships. But her hard work paid off when she was handed the Wal-Mart account.

What career management advice does she offer new graduates? "Students should pursue what they enjoy so they don't end up going through life dreading their jobs." She also advocates spreading your talents around, particularly in summer jobs. "Doing a broad range of jobs as a student worked well for me. It gave me valuable experience on which to draw. And spending time with lots of people — young and old, from all walks of life — is another great way to learn. Reaching out helps you become a more open and approachable person."

Her last words echo those of the young girl who gave her best shot to delivering even a bag of morning papers. "Whatever you touch, do it well." ❖

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