Whether rebranding her firm or in front of a client, Carla Thompson, FSMPS, CPSM, is a game changer.

By definition, a game changer is a person or idea that transforms the accepted rules, processes, strategies, and management of business functions. Carla Thompson embodies this concept, which is the very reason she received the Weld Coxe Marketing Achievement Award (MAA).

It’s the highest individual honor within SMPS, saluting professionals whose achievements and lasting contributions to the professional services marketing field are exemplary.

Thompson received the award at this year’s Build Business conference, held in August in San Diego, but it took some prodding to get her to submit a nomination.

“It started with Nancy Egan and Andrea Walden three or four years ago. I was still on the SMPS board (as the Fellows delegate), making changes to the Fellows program, re-engaging the Fellows, so it was good timing with my contributions to the Society,” Thompson says.

“I honestly don’t like being in the spotlight. I don’t like having the attention. So I said no to Nancy. The following year, I thought about it again for a half minute and said no.”

The years passed but the persuasion continued. “Earlier this year, Melissa Lutz approached me and then she enlisted Donna Corlew. I got on the phone and told them, ‘There are other people who are more deserving.’ They said, ‘This is why you deserve it.’ They had to talk me into it.
I don’t like taking credit or being in the limelight. I like giving credit and making others look good. Besides, I have done nothing in my entire career by myself. It’s always with a team.”

That team effort started when Thompson was growing up. As the oldest of five kids, she had a lot of responsibility put on her. It made her who she is because, as the oldest, she got to change the game. When asked how growing up in a large family helped her, Thompson said, “It served me well throughout my entire career. I’m not afraid to push boundaries. It’s easier to ask forgiveness later than permission upfront.”

**Game Changer to the Profession**

Thompson’s professional journey began in 1980, when she was working as a temp typist with Callison. Frank Stasiowski of FSMPS conducted a management audit of the firm and recommended Thompson serve as the firm’s marketing coordinator.

“I started in the basement and was given opportunities to blossom. They gave me a lot of rope and I took it.”

By her own admission, Thompson knew nothing about the A/E/C industries, so Stasiowski recommended she join SMPS.

At the first luncheon Thompson attended, the guest speaker was Diane Creel, FSMPS, who was director of marketing and communications with CH2M Hill at the time. Creel was also one of the founding members of SMPS and seeing her speak put a bug in Thompson’s ear … or, should we say, the idea that someday Thompson would aspire to a bigger stage.

“I’ve always wanted to give people who work with me opportunities to expand their skill set and see what path they want to pursue. I learned early on from SMPS marketing legends like Diane Creel, Janet Aubry, Bruce Lea, and Nancy Egan that if you pursue your passion, it’s not work anymore. So I made a vow to help my staff and other marketers find their passion. There are so many people who inspired me during my career. I’m just emulating them.”

When you see Thompson at events, she’s usually surrounded by a group of friends and colleagues, and approached by many others along the way. She takes the role of helping and shaping people, particularly women, seriously.

“I’ve tried to be a good champion. I’m kind of pushy. There was no career path when I became an associate in a geotechnical environmental firm. There were no nontechnical associates. I blazed my own trail. I wanted to go where legends had gone.”

One thing’s for sure: Thompson isn’t shy about anything, including the advice she gives her female colleagues. “What I tell other women in our industry is you have to take control of your own destiny. You have to earn trust and respect. It doesn’t get handed to you on a platter. You have to make it happen.”

Part of the MAA submittal process for Thompson involved looking back at her career. “It was a trip down memory lane. By the time Melissa, Donna, and I were was done with my submittal, I realized that I’ve done some cool stuff.”

When the call came from last year’s MAA recipient R. Tim Barrick, FSMPS, informing Thompson she was this year’s recipient, she was overwhelmed. Thompson is the 27th person to receive the Weld Coxe Marketing Achievement Award.

“In an organization as large as SMPS, that is pretty astounding. To be honest, I’m a little uncomfortable about having the spotlight on me, but I’m incredibly proud. Of the 26 that came before me, there’s only one I don’t know. The others have all been my role models and friends. To be in their company is mind-blowing. I get goosebumps thinking about it.”

“One of my fellow Fellows from SMPS Seattle, Ted Sive, told me to have fun and breathe deep before Build Business. ‘Receive without filters all the love and compliments and let it energize you.’”

**Game Changer for Firms**

Thompson has made a long-lasting impact on many firms throughout her career. She has had the pleasure of working with some extraordinary firms over the years, and has left a lasting impact at each of them. After Callison, she was recruited to be director of marketing and business development for Design International, which she successfully rebranded as FORMA. She then joined Hart Crowser as director of marketing and became its first non-technical associate and shareholder.

In 2000, she was recruited to join MulvannyG2 Architecture as vice president for five years. After working for four years as a consultant, she was asked to come back as global marketing director, and stayed another five years, guiding the firm through a major rename and second rebranding effort.

Mitchell C. Smith, CEO of (now) MG2, wrote this of Thompson in a recommendation letter for the MAA: “At two critical junctures, Carla Thompson was instrumental in capturing the business and practice aspirations of the firm through a rebranding effort that served as a catalyst for growth and success.”

She worked closely with firm leaders and principals to develop marketing, business development, and PR strategies, which
took MulvannyG2—now MG2—from its stealth market position to become the third largest architectural firm in Washington state, the 11th largest in the nation, and one of the top 25 architects in China during her tenure.

Her work in the China market set the stage for her time at NAC Architecture, where she served as chief marketing officer for several years. At NAC, Thompson was responsible for rebranding the firm, and she played an integral role in helping it enter the China educational market.

Thompson then received an offer she couldn’t refuse—another opportunity to take an unknown firm and position them as experts in their markets. Today, she represents Core States Group as its first senior director of marketing and plays an integral role in the firm’s growth strategy.

**Game Changer for SMPS and A/E/C**

Thompson joined SMPS Seattle in 1982, and became a Fellow of the Society in 1999. She has presented over 200 seminars and workshops, had numerous articles published in national publications, and garnered more than a dozen SMPS Marketing Communication Awards.

She is the originator of the SMPS Seattle Fellows Forum program, which has been presented at SMPS chapters, as well as regional and Society conferences. She also created and serves as co-instructor for the popular A/E/C Marketing 101 five-part seminar series for SMPS Seattle, which has graduated more than 1,000 professionals.

Thompson has also presented educational programs for numerous affiliated organizations and well-known business consulting firms.

She has been a leader in her chapter and the Society, serving three separate, two-year terms on the Society board of directors as Region V Director, Fellows Delegate, and At-Large Delegate. She chaired the Society’s Chapter Services, Marketing Communications Awards, and Membership committees, and served on six national committees and six national task forces. At the chapter level, she has served as Treasurer, President, Past-President, and Senior Advisor.

**Game Changer for Mentoring**

Throughout her career, Thompson has always served as a role model and mentor through one-on-ones and more broadly in her role as a roundtable leader for SMPS Seattle.

She has taken on the role of creating marketing orientation programs and spends about 20 percent of her time on internal training programs for marketing team members, business developers, administrative staff, technical staff, principals, and firm leaders.

Thompson also took the lead on creating an annual SMPS Seattle Fellows Scholarship to send a deserving member to Build Business—she established the scholarship criteria and personally oversees the program. To date the chapter has awarded eight scholarships valued at over $10,000.

**Enjoying the Game**

While Thompson has accomplished much in her career, she’s always had two rules for whatever she set out to do: the tactic must meet multiple goals or serve multiple purposes and, it must be fun.

“Life’s too short not to have fun at work. It is serious business, but you can still have a good time.”

In her acceptance speech at Build Business, Thompson told the audience a message straight from her heart. “You don’t have to play the same game and follow the same rules as everybody else. The world has enough followers. You have to be different to make a difference.”

And what a difference she has made. Thompson is a passionate leader, beloved mentor and teacher, and a true game changer to the profession, Society, and A/E/C industries.