
The Athena Project

CMS has 56 offices in 50 cities, spread over 31 countries. It brings 10 international law firms together under one banner. CMS Cameron McKenna is one of those 10, with offices around the world, including four in the United Kingdom.

Overview

We are committed to diversity; it is central to our strategy and we believe that an inclusive environment and a diverse workforce are key to having a successful business. Many of our clients are increasingly interested in diversity and inclusion and we are proud to demonstrate our longstanding commitment in this area by working alongside them. We understand the importance of role models and mentors and the Athena Project emerged as a way to highlight some of our lawyers and our clients who are at the forefront of their professions.

For the Athena Project we transformed our London client meeting room floor into an art gallery, featuring 24 portraits and profiles of 28 successful female clients, CMS partners and representatives of government. We launched the exhibition at an event in September attended by over 200 people including clients and CMS employees. There are many additional components to the project, including:

- a “bring your child to work day” tour of the exhibition;
- a glossy catalogue featuring all the photos with their extended profiles; and
- the International Women’s Day “Athena Summit” featuring two client panels focused on the intersection of gender and other diversity strands, and best practice examples in the workplace. The summit was attended by over 140 clients and was a huge success in promoting existing relationships, developing new ones and raising awareness of diversity and inclusion throughout corporations in London and the United Kingdom.

Upcoming events include:

- the launch of The Athena Project website;
- tours of the exhibition for girls from local CSR partner schools; and
- an international “tour” of the exhibition around our offices in Central & Eastern Europe, including the addition of local portraits and profiles.

Business case

We are proud of our culture and our diversity statistics and accomplishments, but we know there is always room for improvement and are always looking for ways to further engage our people and our clients. The Athena Project was, and continues to be, a perfect engagement tool.

The idea for The Athena Project emerged from, and is complementary to, a project that our partner Joanne Wheeler participated in earlier this year with photographer Leonora Saunders called <10%... & Rising. Joanne, Daniel Winterfeldt (Head of International Capital Markets and D&I Partner) and Jay Wetterau (Strategic Projects and Inclusiveness Manager) saw the business benefits of combining the firm’s strategy with Leonora’s artistic vision, to develop a project that would engage a wide spectrum of stakeholders - from our junior lawyers to our clients and CSR partners - by highlighting role models and leaders in our firm, clients and partners across UK businesses and the Government.

At the same time, we saw the opportunity to put a face to all the research and reports, from Lord Davies to the 30% Club and the InterLaw Diversity Forum, which have been featured in the media over the past few years, and demonstrate our commitment, both internally and externally, to responding to them in a meaningful way. All of these reports have challenged the status quo, revealing that only limited progress has been made towards equality and that there is an urgent need for a widespread cultural change. We believe in the importance of role models, mentors and sponsors and the Athena Project is our way to put a face to all the research and reports referred to above. We realised that, while we have many amazing women leaders in our firm and among our clients, this does not always mean they are visible to the business outside of those with whom they come into contact on a day-to-day basis in their roles. We wanted to provide them with a plinth to showcase their amazing achievements and inspiring stories to a wider audience both at CMS and beyond.



Innovation

With the Athena Project, we have found a creative way to highlight women role models in a way that engages all the demographics mentioned above. Most diversity events are one-off; this is a living, evolving project. By making the exhibition permanent, and by continuing to plan events around the brand, the firm demonstrates its commitment to this area in a very public way on a daily basis. We believe this is an unprecedented, bold move and makes a grand and permanent statement.

This project also has significant depth. Although the impact of having an entire floor of “larger than life” one by one-and-a-half meter colour portraits should not be underestimated, this project is not just about “pleasant photos”. The real impact comes from the combination of the portraits with their extended profiles. We get to know the stories of these 28 women – with all their challenges, accomplishments, similarities and differences.

We have come up with a way to engage clients and our firm in a sincere manner and tell their stories in a way that serves as inspiration for the next generation of women lawyers currently making their way through the career pipeline.

Outputs

The outputs from the Athena Project exhibition and related events have increased internal engagement, increased client engagement and increased the firm’s media and external profiles as a leader in diversity and inclusion. We know this has had an impact because of the ongoing and consistent feedback we have been receiving since the project was launched. The following are some examples:

— **Comment from a junior associate.** *“I had heard about Fiona Woolf [CMS energy partner and Lord Mayor of London] and Penelope Warne [Senior Partner] but they are so busy that I didn’t really know them. Reading their profiles has given me a real insight into their stories and all they have accomplished. Not to mention our other partners featured! It makes me very proud to be at CMS!”*

- **Comment from partner about event and clients:** *“...I could not have heard higher praise from BP, National Grid, Centrica, Goldman Sachs, Helen Grant, Baroness Scotland and more. As two lawyers from [a client] left this evening, they went out of their way to tell me how ‘real’ and impressive the evening had been for them. They said, others in the City are talking diversity but we are demonstrating it...”*
- **Comment from a client:** *“The Athena Project had really put CMS on the map for diversity. No other firm has done anything on this scale and people around the City are discussing it...”*

Select Press references:

- An online gallery of the portraits in the Guardian for International Women’s Day (09 March 2014)
- FT (22 February 2014): **“...Office picture gallery.** *A visit to the London offices of CMS Cameron McKenna, the law firm, offers an unexpected delight – a gallery of photographic portraits of women working in professions where they comprise 10 per cent or less of the workforce. The firm has transformed the corridors of its meeting room floor into an exhibition space, with each eye-catching picture carrying a description of the subject and their career...”.*
- From the Times (19 September 2014): **“Snapped up.** *Who are today’s women candidates to feature on tomorrow’s bank notes? Maybe the answer can be seen from tonight at The Athena Project, on display ... on the client floor of CMS Cameron McKenna’s office ...the project is described as “an inspirational look at pioneering women who have made it to the top in the City, Whitehall, industry and the law...”*