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Abstract

Networking is providing new support for women interested in or entering the food service industry. The author discusses how educators and the industry can assist and how one organization is putting together specific programs to provide support and encouragement to women.

Keywords

Dianne Davis, The Impossible Is Possible, John Naisbitt, Networking, Gender, National Initiative Women's Business Ownership

The Impossible Is Possible

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Networking is providing new support for women interested in or entering the food service industry. The author discusses how educators and the industry can assist and how one organization is putting together specific programs to provide support and encouragement to women.

Women in the hospitality and food service industries now have a new wave of support, networking — the phenomenon John Naisbitt highlighted in *Megatrends* and the rising tide that supports women in the industry. Earlier in the 1980s, success was stimulated by three catalysts: the growing percentage of female students in hospitality studies, the increasing number of female managers, and the emerging entrepreneurial opportunities. Networks now add a new catalyst.

What does this all mean for educators? How do they meet the needs of this different generation? What role do they provide? Is there a recognition of the major shift in attitudes that has stimulated women to enter business and develop the future conglomerates?

In the academic world, it is often assumed that the basic needs of students are served. However, while they are receiving an important education in the ABC's of industry, they often fail to receive the tools for survival in the business world. While such skills may be more naturally achieved by men, women's cultural environment requires a special effort at learning those skills. Women in today's economic world represent three distinct markets: the young or college graduate, the career individual, and the mature woman re-entering the market.

An editorial in *Restaurants and Institutions* in November 1983 discussed the new wave of entrepreneurs entering the industry. Reclaiming Americans' traditional sense of self-reliance, women are now asking, "Why not invest in ourselves?" Instead of depending on corporate institutions to provide the basic needs for money, purpose, and pride, they are beginning to help each other and themselves.

Taking this thrust one step further, the "backbone" of entrepreneurial America, the small business, is based on self-reliance. Recent studies have convinced government and business observers that small businesses, not big corporations, are responsible for most of the new jobs created and most of the nation's economic growth. They are also more productive and innovative, exactly right for the women's initiative.

Over 3.7 million businesses are owned by women, and of these, 76 percent were founded rather than inherited by women. Carolyn Gray,

national director of the Office of Women's Business Ownership of the Small Business Administration, recently described a cartoon showing a little girl looking up at her fairy godmother and saying "Prince kissing is passé. Just set me up in my own small business." This is indeed what is happening and food service will benefit from this infusion of new entrepreneurs, since statistics show the majority of women are in the retail and service fields. More women are employed today, and more are attending college. There will be eight times the number graduating with a B.A. in business in the 1990s than in the 1960s. This phenomenon is already reflected in the fact that the number of self-employed women has increased five times faster than the number of men during the past two years.

A new kind of joint venture partnership is forming between the public and private sector. Stimulated by President Ronald Reagan's National Initiative Women's Business Ownership conferences, held in 21 cities in 1983-84, the partnership can be continued by educational institutions and associations. The Small Business Administration offered a workshop, "The Business of Food: Pursuing Success," as one of its 42 national offerings. There is a market for information, resources, and contacts. In city after city, two fast-growing trends repeat themselves: gourmet speciality shops and speciality food manufacture. Moreover, there is an explosion of new catering companies, some hiring space by the hour in commercial kitchens specially designed for this new market, for example, Kitchen Privileges in Washington, D.C.

Workshops can be designed to present candid, practical, local advice given by industry leaders in each community. Panelists are identified role models, and the panels give visibility to women who have achieved. The result is a network and mentors for programs. This was pointedly stated in one program sponsored by the Roundtable for Women in Foodservice (RWF) in San Francisco March 20, 1984. Judith Geffen, Bubbles Baking Company, Los Angeles, said: "When I needed information and guidance 14 years ago, I had to call a head man. Now, you can call me! We have resources and experience — the time is ripe for women in business."

Business Opportunities Abound

Naturally, the long-range goal is profitability for the private sector and women business owners, all of which results in more women being hired, more opportunities, and the development of a stronger leadership for future endeavors. Opening paths to corporate resources, including capital, technology, and procurement, the SBA conferences initiate such access for women in an organized way. For example, students and colleagues should be encouraged to participate in the program that requires governmental contracts to include services and products provided by women. They should also learn how to negotiate such contracts.

To encourage women's access to business contacts, each conference has a business exchange — the Marketplace — which stimulates the direct ability to negotiate with purchasing agents. Major corporations

and federal agencies indicate their needs to the women visiting the Marketplace. The first 1984 conference in Atlanta attracted over 1000 Marketplace registrants. Diverse companies such as Cox Cable, Georgia Power and Gas, NASA, and the U.S. Army joined more than 70 others in this venture. Unfortunately, excellent opportunities such as this are not fully utilized, for often women are either afraid or prejudice the lack of interest in their service or product. In truth, they really lack experience and the ability to negotiate, and the fear of losing a deal prevents their active participation. Since success is directly related to a sense of confidence, this difference is immediately apparent. These are some of the limitations that have prevented many women from interacting effectively in the business world.

Experts believe that knowledge of the world and all its dimensions is most essential in order to be successful as an entrepreneur, even more so than in other endeavors. An entrepreneur will express the difference as follows: "Whatever I have is mine. I'm totally responsible for my success and I'm totally responsible for my failure. It's a special something inside of me. If you have it, you can take it anywhere!"

There are, however, two basics that make it all work: a total belief that it can be done and a willingness to work hard with this combination and then start one's own versions of a venture. Women should be encouraged to take risks and should be taught that being different or being scared is not a reason to prevent action if they truly believe in the worth of what they want to do. Women feel that by doing something entirely their own and knowing they gave it their best, they can at least come away with a sense of fun and accomplishment that is in itself priceless.

Women Lack Business Skills

Recent studies reveal that the average age of women going into their own business is 52 years, with over 15 years of working experience and knowledge of their specialized field, but often no practical business management skills. They often continue to manage their businesses similar to their home kitchens and are shocked to learn there are differences. The team player mentality is frequently missing, which results in many difficulties, especially in delegating responsibilities while properly maintaining adequate control. Mature businesses also present a dilemma, for many women find it impossible to "let go" and still maintain the power to act effectively.

During an SBA workshop in Atlanta on February 2, 1984, panelist Betty Talmadge of Betty Talmadge Associates, Atlanta, said: "I backed into my smoked ham business and catering at Lovejoy, my home, which is a landmark plantation. Only, now I'm getting paid for what I've done free of charge all my life — catering parties."

She related a friend's story:

A very successful person was asking a younger man to what he contributed his success. He replied that when he saw an opportunity, he jumped on it. How do you recognize an opportunity? You don't — you just keep jumping! So sensitize

yourself to market voids for opportunities might only be seen by you. Then take the jump! Don't be afraid of the risk.

An editorial, "No Credit Cards Accepted," in *Food Management*, April 1983, identifies the problem:

Women aren't challenging their own attitudes toward taking risks, toward professional relationships with other people or toward their own goals for lack of them. Women often say they perceive risk as a negative obstacle leading to failure rather than opportunity. A mistake is automatic failure rather than a learning experience. Setting long-term goals has always been a problem for professional women; many tend to work for short-term strategies rather than long-term results. Many lack career orientation because they never had it; some have simply never perceived each step of their career as a possible stepping-stone toward greater self-fulfillment. Many never allow themselves to think about being head of a department or president of a company!

While some dare not think of becoming corporate leaders, others wake up to find themselves with a company in their lap, bequeathed by a family tragedy. Then the challenge is real, and the question asked is not "Will I?" but, "How?" At several SBA conferences, Gray has cautioned that a growing gap exists between the volume of gross receipts from the service industries (9 percent) and the gross receipts of women-owned service businesses (6 percent). She wonders if women are taking the same risks or pricing themselves lower, but not closing the difference by volume? Or are they only concerning themselves in small receipt areas and not exploring fields in which receipts are growing and net return is larger? Underpricing is one of the most common mistakes women make when they go into business. This issue must be addressed in the classroom.

Many Lack Formal Education

Many women enter this industry by the back door and lack formal education. Educators have a special mandate to help those who have been told that they are such wonderful cooks and should open a restaurant, cater parties, or manufacture their special cookie, carrot cake, or hot dog sauce. Are they truly denying the world by not producing for the general market? The industry cannot stand by as a pushcart generation fumbles in the Concorde Era, wandering the streets of trial and error. There is an unmet market for institutions. While continuing education programs may offer courses, there needs to be a full and formal educational support system.

A model does exist, AWED, the American Women's Economic Development, an association which prepares and guides women in business. The RWF has reorganized their concepts and developed SPECS, a Special Practical, Expert, Counseling Service which provides information for RWF members entering, re-entering, or advancing in the industry. The program provides help on a person-to-person basis, networking resources in a formal system. A partnership is needed between formal education and networking organizations developing hotlines and access to the three most important facets for success:

What you know, whom you know, and who knows you.

The complexities of business have women considering how to diversify their efforts for improved economic returns: caterers with private label products; gourmet shops with a cafe; gourmet shops catering and manufacturing specialty items, catering on wheels for contract dining. The overall concept is to maximize talents and interests and best serve the market. However, new ideas for women are entering the picture: joint-venturing, sub-contracting, and syndication. These concepts should be explored more fully due to the multiple phases women have during their lifetime. Career strategies for them should be realistically reviewed and long-term goals determined. Not every woman wants a lifetime career, business, or full-time employment, but if circumstances require her quick return to the business world, she will know the best ways to reenter and maximize her skills. Research proves that these realities are often perceived differently by women and they do have different attitudes, which in many cases they do not realize affect the bottom line.

Networking Is Trend For '80s

Networking is just a new buzz word for a century-old idea. However, a formal system to structure women's business needs is new and here to stay. Women in food service traditionally have had no support system. They have lacked mentors to show them how to channel their talents and their willingness to work long and hard hours for success. There has not been a mechanism for them to learn from other professionals' mistakes and successes because they lacked a brainstorming contact. With little direction, no support system, and no networking program to look to for guidance and counsel, each woman entering the industry often finds herself starting all over again from the beginning.

The Roundtable for Women in Foodservice was born as a national professional support system. Cooperation has been received from industry, universities, and public agencies. Hundreds of women are now identified as industry leaders through the specially-designed program of using focus members, target discussion leaders, panelists, and keynote speakers in three-prong education programs. During the first year, over 3,000 women attended either a major roundtable regional event, university-based workshops, or local chapter meetings.

The visibility of women's contributions to the industry was highlighted by the presentation of the Pacesetter Awards for trend-setting or innovative concepts by peers. This event at the NRA in Chicago in 1984 was historic; 20 women were recognized for their outstanding accomplishments. The overwhelming response for nominations confirmed a belief that this is an important area for academic study. The roundtable educational program is structured to fill two voids, one in the knowledge of business sociability and one in the access to the thinking of prominent leaders outside the food industry. Regional roundtable events are planned with influential speakers and an industry response panel. Focus members who are industry leaders encourage table introductions and an exchange of

business cards.

Through these devices, women are enjoying for the first time an opportunity to discuss problems or events which would not occur to them without the stimulation of other professional women present in a relaxed informal setting. Participants have already seen profitable benefits from these structured activities. But they must also be given support, confidence, and economic access to make their dreams realities. Educational programs can guide and industry should support, both aiding a cadre of professional people through the maze of the business world.

Albert Einstein said: "Imagination is more powerful than knowledge — to raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle requires creative imagination." Now it's up to the industry and education.