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WOMEN IN BUSINESS AWARDS SECTION

A Baby Boomer on the Move

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The annual Women in Business Awards has been a special event for me since 2003. That was the first year I knew there was such a thing. It was the year I started my own company, and boldly charged ahead on a new path. The word “boldly” isn’t exactly the correct word, but close enough.

Attending my first WIB awards that year was both awesome and inspiring. To see several hundred professional women whom I assumed were, for the most part, in business for themselves, coming together to acknowledge achievements of other businesswomen was wonderful. What I also learned at that dinner was the enormous amount of support and encouragement these women generously offered to one another. It wasn’t long before I learned about and, of course, joined two of the professional women’s organizations in town.

I had initially joined the Jacksonville Regional Chamber of Commerce because someone told me I should. I soon found fun and camaraderie in the Professional Women’s Network of the Chamber, still in its infancy with less than 100 members. Now, the Professional Women’s Council (PWC) has well over 400 members and continues to grow in number and value to its members. I also joined Women Business Owners and met still more vibrant, intelligent and enthusiastic women, all of whom owned their own companies. Once again, I was impressed with the personal interactions and assistance I observed among these women. I also saw strength. Its one thing to have strength in numbers, but what I saw was women bolstering each other’s strength and confidence. I liked that.

And then there was the diversity. I recall being slightly surprised, but pleased, to talk with two different women who owned trucking companies. I met another woman who was building a new style of Florida home in partnership with her husband. And she had a Styrofoam and steel block to illustrate her point. I expected to network with accountants, advertisers, financial planners and consultants, but here were women who owned and operated construction companies, a furniture franchise, a janitorial service, a chocolate making business, and many more formerly non-traditional (for women) firms. Their companies were of all sizes and types and profit levels. I felt a new “can-do” attitude coming on. Each of these women had had a small business starting point somewhere, sometime, I figured. That’s where I was in 2003.

I’ve often thought of myself as a latent child of the 60s. Don’t look for my picture in any of those Woodstock-type photos, but I loved the music, the Beatles, the clothes, the dancing and what I now view as the idealism of the early 1960s. And I remember *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Soon thereafter, it hit public awareness square in the face. I didn’t buy the book, but I wish I had. It opened a brave new world for females, a world of personal choice versus the assumption of becoming a nurse or a teacher, and then a housewife. I was among the young women in business offices being

chided about joining the revolution and burning our bras. Most of us did neither. Some of us may wish we had. It was an exciting time.

Life in the corporate world was different, way back then. I may sound like an elder in saying that, but so what? That's one of my new freedoms in this, my 60th decade in the journey of life. I've occasionally told younger women that in the 60s, 70s and even the 80s, women in the workforce experienced a different existence than they do now. Professional women were often not supportive of female co-workers, particularly if one was interested in moving up in an organization. Ladders with missing rungs and the proverbial glass ceilings were a staunch reality. There have been changes for working women in all capacities of the work force. I am still a tiny bit alarmed that a pregnant woman can stay at her job right up to the time of delivery and it's perfectly fine with her employer. Employers of old were shouting: What about safety? What about corporate liability? What about sick days and productivity? In the 1960s business world, a woman was expected to leave her job as soon as she "started to show." And she left. I don't remember there being any choice involved. I often wondered if working women today, those under say the age of 40, really know about the struggles, sacrifices and mountains their older sisters, well, maybe their mothers and grandmothers, climbed, the foundations they laid, for the lifestyle and benefits working women have now.

Nearly all of my working life was spent in the corporate world. I'm happy to have left it behind, thanks to the opportunity for early retirement. But I'm not quite ready to close up shop just yet. Heck, I just opened one up in 2003. It's called Qualitative Research Services. I've conducted various kinds of market research for over 25 years, always for a corporate employer. Now I'm on the other side of the fence, on the supplier side, serving business owners who understand the need for and value of, clean, actionable information. Most often, this kind of information comes directly from a firm's client base. Customers can help develop concepts and new products, they can test your products or services, and they can most definitely tell you what they like and don't like about it. The co-founder of Southwest airlines, Herb Kelleher, is quoted as saying, "Customers provide you with the most accurate barometer of what's right and wrong." Customer satisfaction surveying is a generic term for formally communicating with customers to seek their attitudes and opinions, their insights, likes and dislikes. Customer and consumer feedback is critical if a company is to continue meeting and going beyond expectations of its customers. I always stress the importance of getting their words, as well as their ratings numbers in doing this research. Words give color to the black and white numbers of research.

Another wise, and very wealthy businessman, has said, "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning." (Bill Gates) They can also signal your company's demise. One author notes that unhappy customers are eleven times more likely to talk about your business than happy customers. They won't be a good marketing source for you. Word of mouth is pretty powerful.

I have enjoyed talking with my clients' customers and, at the same time, I've learned valuable lessons from my clients that will improve my services to them. I'm still learning. One of my biggest lessons, and challenges, continues to be time management. When I started my business, I just didn't know how much I didn't know. I've received a great deal of help from the Small Business Resource Center at UNF, the Small Business Association, the Small Business Center and, of course, the Women's Business Center. I've learned, also, from the wonderful women in our professional organizations, like PWC and WBO.

Women have a wealth of resources and help readily available here in Jacksonville. To better understand the needs of women business owners, last year the Center for Women's Business Research, in partnership with Jacksonville University, released a groundbreaking study commissioned by Sandy

Bartow, director of the Jacksonville Women's Business Center. The study quantified the economic impact, obtained benchmarks, and identified the needs of women business owners in Northeast Florida. One of its important findings: in 2006, women business owners in the seven counties of Northeast Florida generated \$18.8 billion in total economic impact and 225,000 jobs. "From the survey results, we get a picture of women business owners, their aspirations for their businesses, the type of training and development activities in which they participate, what they see as key problem areas, and their educational format and instructor preferences," said Sandy Bartow. The JWBC is available and positioning itself to offer even more assistance to business owners.

Going back to my original impressions at the 2003 WIB awards dinner, they still hold true. I have been fortunate and blessed to be a part of both WBO and PWC. Women in these organizations have been truly kind, helpful and supportive, during my good and not-so-good times. There are several other professional women's organizations in town that I have yet to explore. Last year, the president of PWC, Pixie Larizza, began to encourage communication and information sharing among many of these organizations. Karen Green, publisher of Women's Digest, offered to include a combined calendar of events. The project is still in the works, but something we will all look forward to having.

Women business owners are making a big impact in northeast Florida, and we plan to stay the course. There's much to be done. Our mantra should be:

"As long as you're going to think anyway, think big."

– *Donald Trump, real estate executive*