



GIRLPOWER

Women Entrepreneurs
Help Define Wake County
Business Landscape

BY KRISTY STEVENSON

EN·TRE·PRE·NEUR

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The term *entrepreneur* comes from the Old French *entreprendre*, meaning to undertake. By the early 20th century, it appears to have taken on the connotation of go-getter when applied to one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise—a quality that may also be found in the phrase *entrepreneurial spirit* which began being used at about the same time.

The number of female business owners with this moniker is on the rise. In fact, the office of Wake County Economic Development reports that Raleigh has been named in the top 15 U.S. cities for women entrepreneurs! Female executives are said to encompass approximately one-third of all entrepreneurs worldwide. In the words of Helen Reddy, “I am woman, hear me roar.” With American women now comprising a whopping 40 percent of new entrepreneurs (the number of women-owned businesses has increased nearly 3,000 percent since 1972), it’s clear that more females are tackling business ownership than ever before.

Today, four out of every 10 businesses in the U.S. are women-owned. Why are so many interested in pursuing this path? Forbes reported that women favored entrepreneurship to have more flexibility, charge what they are worth; have more control over their future, advance more quickly, and follow their passion. These are fundamentally different reasons than their male counterparts—as in many instances, women consider financial success an external affirmation of their ability rather than a primary goal.

“Running a business, any business, requires a breadth of knowledge that isn’t for the faint of heart,” says Pam Blondin, owner of Deco Raleigh. Even with 30 years of experience, she is still learning. Changes in this market have been impacted by the Triangle’s growth. Over the past six years, Blondin has become very involved in downtown Raleigh’s economic development. “When I opened Deco, there were a small handful of retail businesses downtown. Now, there are so many, we’ve formed a collective with close to 50 members who are focused on building community and making Raleigh a unique and vibrant place to live and visit,” she says.

“The increase in the number of families and businesses that have started in this area have directed more business,” says Jill Santa-Lucia, CEO of Catering Works. She sees their market as more diverse than it was 30 years ago.

The Triangle’s exponential growth, coupled with the desire for what’s trending, has created a fantastic setting for Amanda Kimball, owner of Twisted Scizzors Salon. Like Santa-Lucia’s customers, Kimball’s are today more educated about what they want for their money.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

“Nothing has transformed the market more than the continuous technological innovations we are seeing,” says Patty Briguglio, president of PFB Connect. In years past, you could expect one great technology advancement in your lifetime. Today, those advancements are happening faster than we can track. “These innovations require us as leaders to constantly change and adapt our business models. Because business goals and outcomes may stay the same, the way we leverage the tools to achieve those goals must adjust over time,” she says.

EXPERIENCE & EXPECTATIONS

One of the most important components any entrepreneur can have is a business plan. “The process of creating one is, by necessity, the practice of thinking through all of the details of your prospective business. Until you put it down on paper, commit it to a spreadsheet, and say it out loud, your business will remain nothing more than a good idea,” says Blondin. Start by identifying resources specific to

your goals: classes, seminars, and personal mentors. Laying everything out can be overwhelming, but working through it will absolutely strengthen your business.

Julianne Walther, owner of Cary Quilting Company adds, “I would suggest that a good knowledge of bookkeeping, budgeting, marketing, and operations is essential to good business management.”

According to the MBA Knowledge Base, small businesses owned by women have traditionally focused on fashion, food, and the sector of other services. More recently, however, women have been moving rapidly into manufacturing, construction, and other industrial fields. The hidden entrepreneurial potential of women has gradually been changing with a growing sensitivity to their roles and economic status in society.

“I feel that there is a bias towards female business owners due in part to the multi-level-marketing ‘business owning’ craze,” says Walther. “When I tell someone that I’m a business owner, I feel like I need to explain that it’s an actual

brick-and- mortar investment.” Without any business loans, Walther has gone from a small startup to a 6,000 square foot destination for quilters—and is thrilled to employ 17 other dedicated business women. “As a mother, I want to show my kids that hard work can equal success, and I want to be a role model to them to shoot for what they want in life, and to follow their passion,” she says. “I love knowing that my husband is proud of me and the business that I’ve built with his support.”

Statistics show that men tend to embrace more risk than women in a new business venture. Categorically speaking, however, women have an advantage as they are often seen as more emotionally intelligent than men, crafting strong interpersonal skills that are vital for framing strategies and building support. They can promote economic and social equity, facilitating self-fulfillment and increasing the use of human capital—defined as knowledge, skill, perception, and expertise. Women also exhibit a self-branding attitude and the motivation to pursue



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their ideals in spaces that don't lose their competitive advantage as quickly.

FACING CHALLENGES

The consistency of business messaging has not changed—just the delivery methods. “In my industry, everyone works remotely,” says Wendy Coulter, president & CEO of Hummingbird Creative Group, Inc. “I’m having to learn how to lead, manage, and connect with remote teams. We’re still collaborative, still face to face, just not always in the same room.” Many business owners are not networking and getting to events the way they used to because they are tied to their devices, and they’re expected to get work done faster because of technological advancements.

Studies show that many of the differences thought to exist between male and female business owners are more myth than reality. When all other variables are taken into account, male and female entrepreneurs have the same education levels, start businesses of similar sizes, and work roughly the same number of hours toward their goals. Statistically, women are still found in small numbers in the C-Suite, but are growing businesses faster.

Male entrepreneurs do not suffer the same degree of prejudgment that women may experience. Blondin has worked through any insecurities about being a woman in the business world. “At 58 years old, I’ve been talked down to, dismissed, overlooked, and underestimated enough times that I’ve learned how to deal with it,” she says.

Women may always face challenges being taken seriously by banks, landlords, and repairmen. “I have expanded my business twice since we opened, and have been ‘little lady-ed’ several times by electricians, drywallers, HVAC people, etc. during my build-outs of the new spaces,” says Walther. “It’s been assumed that my husband and I are co-owners, and I’ve been asked if we should solicit his input on construction decisions.”

Santa-Lucia tells a similar story. When she entered the business world in 1989 at the age of 22, the climate was very male-dominated and sexist. Turned down for a

loan from a male banker, she was told her business wouldn’t survive five years. This year is their 30th anniversary. “I find I don’t apologize as much as I used to for being successful,” she says, “I embrace it more.”

“It was harder to be seen as an equal years ago, but I didn’t know it because I was young and ready to conquer the world,” says Coulter. As she’s gotten older, she’s become more aware. She leads a lot of groups—some all men, some all women—and in her experience, each act and think completely differently. “In a boardroom full of women, the goal is to work. In a

back by family considerations (work/life balance) and the lack of networks that can help them launch and sustain a successful venture.

“Certainly, one of the challenges I face as a female entrepreneur is managing work and home life,” says Kimball. “I don’t say balance because it’s not balanced. I spend most of my days at the salon or working on things for the salon.” Kimball travels all over the U.S. attending classes and teaching salon techniques, offering her the opportunity to keep her skills sharp and connect with industry leaders. She feels fortunate

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boardroom full of men, the goal is to make decisions,” she says. She’s learned to adapt for both, and that helps her navigate.

Despite the growth and success of women in business, they can still be held

to have a fantastic support system at home that allows her to do this.

In Walther’s case, she juggles child-raising and household responsibilities along with business ownership. “I was a

stay-at-home mom when I had my first business, and many tasks like driving kids to medical appointments and sports practice, staying home with sick children, and taking pets to the vet still fall on me even though I no longer work out of the house,” she says.

“As a business owner, in order to scale, you’ve got to get yourself out of those trenches and remember the 30,000-foot view,” says Coulter. “Because women raise children and manage households, we are about getting things done. You may have checked off a long list today, but the challenge is whether those things were the most important. I’ll work from a restaurant or coffee house, but you will not find me working from home for this reason,” she says.

Flexibility is a factor in many women’s decision to start a business. Entrepreneurship is often seen as an ideal way to juggle the competing demands of career and family. “The challenges of being a female entrepreneur align with also being a mom

can always be a challenge. Ongoing dedication is the key to progress and success.

SUPPORT NETWORKS

Women’s Entrepreneurship Day, recognized this year on November 19, is proclaimed to empower, celebrate, and support women in business worldwide. Locally, there are a number of groups that meet regularly to build a professional sisterhood and galvanize women toward their goals.

“While I naturally gravitate to service roles, like serving on the boards of non-profit organizations and volunteering for roles that support the growth of Raleigh, I have found that this sort of connection to the community has helped my business immensely,” said Blondin. She also recommends going for coffee regularly with other small business owners. “This is tremendously important for the sake of sanity! It is so helpful to have someone to help process challenges—whether it’s cashflow,

to begin forming connections with other local business leaders,” says Briguglio, who also suggests reaching out to other successful business owners to see what groups they recommend—and if they are a good match for you and your business.

Kimball also recommends being part of your local Chamber of Commerce. “It’s a great way to meet individuals who care for the good of the community,” she says. “The Cary Chamber, which we are members of, has wonderful meetings and fantastic resources for business owners.”

Briguglio suggests that no matter what industry you’re in, you should be plugged into trade associations. “Don’t just join the associations for your industry. You need to also join the associations for your client’s industry,” she says. “It’s the idea that you don’t want to just hang out with your competitors; you want to hang out with your client’s competitors too.”

“It is important to belong to industry trade groups and attend as many educational conferences as you can that pertain to your business,” says Santa-Lucia. “Invest in your employees’ education too. If you can’t attend meetings or conferences, make sure they can.”

Coulter emphasizes having passion for the organizations you choose: don’t just be a joiner. “Sometimes being away from your business and being a part of something else can provide you with clarity,” she says.

The Women Owned Small Business [WOSB] certification, designed to help more women owned small businesses win federal contracts and thrive in a competitive business environment, is recommended as it builds corporate credibility.

Blondin praises seminars offered by SCORE, the nation’s largest network of volunteer, expert business mentors, and a resource partner of the U.S. Small Business Administration. She also suggests reaching out to those in your circles who might serve as advisors and mentors; she leaned heavily on friends and contacts with expertise in almost every aspect of launching and running a business—including bankers, CPAs, bookkeepers, landlords, vendors, and contractors. “They have seen it all!” says Blondin.

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and trying so hard to be everything to everyone. Sometimes I think that I am super woman, but I’m not,” says Santa-Lucia. “It’s important to accept that sometimes you have to say no to save yourself from overdoing.”

This isn’t true for every entrepreneur. In fact, some say that their challenges are the same as any business owner, male or female. There may even be a few financing opportunities available to you specifically because you’re a woman. The tricky thing about being an independent business owner, though, is that your time is at a premium. To give 100 percent, many work on their business every single day—doing the books, crunching data, placing orders, and working with staff. And access to resources such as money, people, and time

personnel, or personal stress—you need to be able to share honestly with someone.”

Area support groups favored by our entrepreneurs include ATHENA of the Triangle; the Downtown Raleigh Alliance; Enterprising Women; Meetups that embrace networking and social gatherings for business women of all types (Women’s Power Networking [WPN]: Coffee & Contacts is a good example); National Association of Women Business Owners [NAWBO], Greater Raleigh; Raleigh Professional Women’s Forum; and Women Business Owners Network [WBON] of Cary. Many offer online training and give awards which also help with business credibility and recognition.

“The Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce is an exceptional organization

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

And when the time is right, you can also serve as a mentor to someone else. “Helping someone to grow their business and realizing that you had a small part in that success—there is no better feeling in the world,” says Briguglio. Coulter strives to help young women learn leadership skills rather than focus on appearances. And Kimball, inspired by client interactions, says, “I never realized how important it is to make someone feel ‘lifted.’”

INSPIRATION AND CONTINUED GROWTH

Living in one of the best cities won’t guarantee success, as all entrepreneurs must overcome obstacles and chart their own path to self-fulfillment. If you’re a woman who’s ready to take steps toward entrepreneurship, here are a few suggestions on how you can beat the odds and get further faster:

- *Start small but dream big.* Even if you’re not ready to quit your job, don’t put your entrepreneurial goals on the back burner. Build out a timeline filled with actionable steps you can start taking

now. A side hustle can be the perfect way to get a feel for being your own boss without giving up your main source of income.

- *Explore your city’s business landscape.* Research regulations and bylaws that could be pertinent to your business idea. Good places to start include business licensing laws, and small business tax breaks, as well as which local businesses are doing well and why.
- *Seek out local resources for women entrepreneurs.* Many cities recognize the important role small businesses, startups, and self-employed workers play in fueling local economies. And some have responded with support systems designed to foster growing businesses—and the women entrepreneurs who lead them.
- *Network with other self-employed women.* Don’t underestimate the power of meeting, working with, and learning from like-minded, entrepreneurial women. The local organizations mentioned here can be the perfect way

to connect with other women and find a new friend, mentor, or even a future business partner.

“I think it’s important for us to acknowledge, remember, and learn from the women who came before us,” says Coulter. “Let’s not forget the lessons they have to teach.”

From colleagues to clientele, all of the entrepreneurs we talked to were motivated by the day-to-day impact of the industries they’re in. “I am inspired by people who care about their communities and take action to make things better,” says Blondin. “Making positive change often comes down to offering a new idea or saying the thing that others are only thinking. Wake County is full of people like this, and the face of our community is changing because of them.”

Kristy Stevenson is the Editor of Wake Living magazine and an award-winning public relations professional. You can learn more about Kristy’s writing and editing experience, as well as the way she helps companies communicate in both the short- and long-term by visiting www.kristystevenson.com.



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