

Women In The Industry: Leading Ladies

A growing number of women hold the reins of building service companies. Female executives discuss their business success

By Lori Veit

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For decades, the cleaning industry was dominated by men. Sure, there were plenty of female cleaners, but very few female executives. Family businesses, too, were almost invariably led by men and passed down to their sons.

Today, however, the numbers of female executives are increasing. Look at the International Sanitary Supply Association ([ISSA](#)) and Building Service Contractors Association International ([BSCAI](#)) shows, and not only will one see scores of women with “CEO” or “Owner” on their name badges, but networking forums set aside as well.

But the road to business success in the cleaning industry, or in any industry, is not an easy one. There are numerous hurdles to overcome, and unfortunately, those obstacles are even greater for women.

Through it all, it takes grit and determination to achieve success — and no where can that be greater seen than in these leading ladies’ beginnings.

Starting smart

Josie Ames immigrated here from Europe in 1950. She was four years old, and neither of her parents spoke English. She cleaned during high school and vacations, and worked as a quality manager; then, as a 33-year-old mother of two, experienced a bitter divorce.

“My self esteem was just about shot,” she says.

Ames had nothing to lose when she joined the National Guard, as the oldest woman in her company.

“Some of the West Point people there called me ‘mom,’ which I really resented,” she shudders, adding that she rose above the discomfort and graduated with honors.

“It gave me self confidence,” she says. “I wanted to go out and make a living for my children. I wasn’t afraid any more and I knew if I was going to do something, I’d follow through.”

She founded Ames Services, Annville, Pa., in 1987 and today at 58, the entrepreneur has 75 permanent employees servicing the commercial and residential markets.

Owner of Denver-based Time Creators Inc., Vivienne Lloyd, 52, also started up her own company. In 2002, her spouse, a successful executive, became permanently disabled. Having entertained large groups of corporate business associates while her family was stationed in South Africa, she found it natural that her organizational and cleaning abilities should transfer into a money-making venture.

As a former society woman who lived in the midst of Apartheid, she says she never dreamed she would be a citizen of the U.S., cleaning other people's homes. But today Time Creators, Inc., has grown to 170 commercial and residential accounts.

Other women became leaders after inheriting or purchasing their companies from family members. After college, and the intern track at Omaha-based Midwest Maintenance Co., Inc., Jamie Gutierrez Vela, 38, bought the firm from her parents several years ago, and assumed its presidency.

The 400 employee firm has won numerous business awards, including Inc. Magazine's 2002 Top 100 Fastest Growing Inner City Companies.

Gutierrez Vela has thought long and hard about how societal expectations play with her head, her heart and the company's balance sheet. Before taking over she talked with women who were thriving and growing huge companies of their own to get their take on life and success.

"In my culture, we're so family oriented," she says. "It's hard to be a thriving career woman and capitalist. My dad said: 'you can't have kids and run a company.' I said: 'I'm going to take what I like!'"

Credible competition

Challenges never end, and one in particular has been a challenge to women ever since they joined the workforce — competing with men.

Tiffany Woodley, 30, is vice president in charge of finance at Woodley Building Maintenance in Kansas City, Mo. Woodley says her greatest challenge has been establishing credibility with clients, vendors and colleagues.

"Because the industry is male dominated a lot of times it is more difficult to establish your credibility," she explains. "A man walks in, and has automatic credibility."

She attends conventions, learns constantly, as well as speaks, writes and tries to keep a high profile. In meetings she'll pose a question directly to individuals she feels aren't making the connection that she is a company officer and industry insider. Of course she already knows the answer, but it establishes her as decision maker.

"I see a change immediately," Woodley observes.

Credibility also is an issue for Gutierrez Vela; she finds it humorous when trade show booth vendors dote on the male employee accompanying her, assuming he's in the industry, and she's a vacationing spouse.

But when it's something important, the mistaken identity loses its charm — a banker treated her disrespectfully over the telephone, and generally made the loan process difficult. She was about to pull her application when she ran into the bank's CEO at an unrelated function. She mentioned her experience, adding that she could pay cash instead of using a loan at all, to build her facility. "They couldn't get to me quick enough," she says, recalling the sudden turnaround in her loan application.

"I think [women] have to be tougher, usually tougher than you want to, to let others know that you are serious in your goals and expectations," advises Christy Caley, quality insurance manager, Great Lakes Cleaning, St. Joseph, Mich., and webmaster/editor of Cleanpeers.com. "I don't think it makes you any less approachable. Balancing the two can be a challenge. It's simply a matter of remaining focused — fair yet firm. Sometimes it's no fun to be called that five-letter name, but life goes on."

"When I was young, and less confident I got a different reaction from people," says Gutierrez Vela. "Now I don't pay attention to reactions, or they're reacting to my new confidence."

On the other hand, Lloyd is just venturing into the commercial market, but is a bit apprehensive. Her time living in South Africa has instilled some cultural influences she says she needs to overcome when communicating with her customers.

"I must admit I'm a little nervous about bigger commercial jobs," says Lloyd, who remains determined to add more to a growing client roster. "A lot of building managers are men. I think some of it has to do with South African culture where women were subservient to men. I need to think of them as an equal. I'm going to change my attitude — be more assertive."

Affirmative action

Because of the business-world prejudices towards women, getting a foot in the door can be a tough process. But legal precedents such as affirmative action can help even the playing field.

Rosita "Rose" Galera, 68, owner of Clean Plus Systems II in Hawaii, rose through the ranks before going solo in the early 90s.

"Being a female operations manager, a minority [Asian] and also having member affiliation with the International Executive Housekeeper Association, led to gaining of construction cleaning awards of many new military family housing projects built on federal properties," Galera explains.

Affirmative action also helped Ames to acquire contracts, but she says, it's not a panacea.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a woman or minority — they’re looking for [the] best job at [the] lowest price,” she says.

Achieving balance

Indeed, the pressure is on all cleaners to provide more for less. And executive-level women have the added pressure of being family workhorse — chauffeur, cook, shopper and so on.

“We receive only a certain number of hours a day,” advises Woodley. “We must prioritize to find balance in our work and personal lives. It’s challenging for both men and women, but probably more for women because of the expectations society has for women.”

“I can’t take care of business, kids, and husband if I’m not taking care of me,” adds Gutierrez Vela. “I’ve seen myself fall into the trap of not eating right, not exercising, not making time for spirituality, not spending enough time with my kids — and I get down on myself. But if I do make time, everything falls into place.”

Lloyd even makes time to perform housekeeping chores for people recovering from surgery, which gets her mind off her business for awhile, and gives her a different sense of accomplishment.

A need for networking

Credibility, communication, balance and other ideas were discussed at ISSA and BSCAI convention women’s forums this year and last.

“We need more [information] for women,” says Gutierrez Vela. “How to be a good mom, wife and run a company; how to deal with men in workplace that don’t want to work with women...we’re pioneers. We just don’t have a lot of examples yet. If we network, we start to talk about the different examples and issues.”

“It’s not an industry where I’ve found the ‘good old boys,’” she continues. She’s formed positive relationships with male counterparts through BSCAI, and says they’re so welcoming she even feels comfortable cajoling them for not having more women on their boards.

“Mentoring doesn’t always have to come from another woman; it can come from a man,” agrees Woodley, adding that conventions and industry events are also excellent places to meet potential mentors.

“I think that any time a woman excels in the business it is proof that we belong to a very integrated industry,” adds Caley.

Lori Veit is a business writer in Madison, Wis., and a frequent contributor to Contracting Profits.