

Date: Friday, April 1, 2011, 6:00am EDT - Last Modified: Thursday, March 31, 2011, 3:59pm EDT



Bill Tijerina | for Business First

Rhonda DeMuth has built her software company by developing a strong management team and using an outside executive group for business advice.

Rhonda DeMuth does not view her company as a woman-owned business.

“I’m just a business owner and I don’t expect any preferential treatment,” said the CEO of TDCI Inc., which provides technology and marketing software to the manufacturing industry.

That attitude just might be the best one for most women-owned firms to employ.

Despite an explosion in the number of businesses owned by women in this country, the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) in a July 2010 study found that nationally, women-owned firms held only 3.95 percent of all revenue.

Between 1997 and 2007, the market share for women-owned firms dropped by more than 10 percent (from 4.4 percent to 3.95 percent) while the total percentage of women-owned firms grew to 28.75 percent.

Failure to mainstream

Susan Wilson Solovic, author of *The Girls' Guide to Building a Million Dollar Business*, and CEO of SBTV.com points out in her work that female CEOs have less access to capital, markets and technical resources than their male counterparts.

Yet much of the help women business owners need is readily available to them and to the men who own businesses – just not in the same way.

In essence, women business owners are segregated by the main governmental agency designed to help them.

In its report, the U.S. Chamber calls it a “failure to mainstream.” Here’s how it happened: The [Small Business Administration](#) created Women’s Business Centers and promoted them to female business owners.

But the Small Business Development Centers and Procurement Technical Assistance Centers are more robust and advanced and would be the more effective place for women entrepreneurs to get support, according to the U.S. Chamber.

What this does is isolate women, preventing them from networking with entrepreneurs who are hitting stronger growth targets and accessing broader levels of expertise and support, the U.S. Chamber said in its report.

But all success is relative, DeMuth said.

There are 46,751 majority women-owned firms in the Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2007 Survey of Business Owners.

Those firms posted revenue of \$7.1 billion, according to data released in February. And 4,174 of them employ more than 42,038 people combined, with a combined payroll of more than \$1 billion.

Many of these companies, such as DeMuth’s TDCI, are doing well.

The keys to success, said DeMuth and others interviewed for this story, are building your own networks of support and not being afraid to ask for help and guidance.

“We are in an industry dominated by men,” DeMuth said of her technology firm. “But I picked an industry that if you do well and if you have a good product, you will do well. That’s the nature of IT.”

How did DeMuth lead her firm to hit \$6.7 million in revenue in 2009?

She doesn’t shy away from tough decisions.

“I am more of a nurturing type of person. It was very difficult to let 35 percent of my staff go just to survive,” she said. “But the inspiration is you need cash.”

She surrounds herself with a strong management team.

“I give them a lot of freedom and flexibility to handle their functions using their own style, but making sure that we are all marching to the same vision,” DeMuth said.

And she belongs to an executive group that is her outside sounding board.

“It’s good to have outside observers to ask the challenging questions,” she said. “They look at it differently because they aren’t living and breathing what I do every day.”

Outside support

Being able to turn to trusted advisers is a huge source of support for **Nancy Kramer**, founder and chairwoman of digital marketing firm [Resource Interactive](#).

She and business partner **Kelly Mooney**, CEO, recently put together their company’s first advisory board. Resource’s tremendous growth pushed the idea to the forefront.

The firm’s top line grew by 30 percent in 2010 and it hired 100 people, which was a lot of work, Kramer said.

“Sometimes when you grow so fast it can be as much of a challenge as when you are not growing, as far as onboarding people and getting them familiar with the way your company does business.”

The advisory board is something Kramer talked about doing for a long time and had seen work well at other businesses.

“It’s been very helpful, and we’re not afraid to ask for help,” Kramer said. “We just needed to have more experienced folks at the table.”

economic independence

The opportunity to gain feedback and insight from a diverse group is essential for personal and professional growth as a business leader.

That is especially true for women, said **Carol Clark**, president of Women for Economic and Leadership Development and co-founder of e-learning company Mindleaders, based in Dublin.

WELD focuses on economic independence and leadership for women through various programs and networking.

Its membership is 60 percent executive women from large corporations.

The rest of the group is formed by women business owners, women in leadership positions at nonprofits, students and senior citizens.

That mix can prove fruitful when small- business owners rub elbows with the women working at large firms who are in a position to buy products, Clark said.

But Clark, who also is a volunteer counselor with SCORE, said she is not surprised that women-owned firms are grabbing such a small piece of the economic pie.

“Many woman-owned businesses are small and doing wonderful things, but other organizations simply don’t know anything about them,” she said.

And they should.

The Center for Women’s Business Research in McLean, Va., in an October 2009 study, “The Economic Impact of Women-Owned Businesses In the United States,” found the overall economic impact of women-owned firms equated to \$2.8 trillion, coupled with the more than 23 million people directly and indirectly employed by these firms.

“The results ... prove that women-owned firms are not a small, niche market but are a major contributor and player in the overall economy,” the report stated. “The data also illustrate the need for new thinking and programming to support women who seek to grow their businesses.”

Despite the overall lack of financial growth for women-owned firms, TDCI’s DeMuth thinks times are getting better.

“The road is paved today for women business owners and so they have an advantage compared to women 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago,” she said. “When they hit the bump in the road it’s not end of world. They find a way to get over it and move on.”

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