

Working women get the business?

By KATIE KERWIN

A woman must do a job twice as well to be considered half as good, according to an old adage.

Four Birmingham-Bloomfield women who have recently gone into business for themselves give the theory varying degrees of credence, based on their personal experiences. Bloomfield free lance public relations specialist Sylvia Coughlin said she finds that both her gender and self-employed status make dealing with some customers tougher.

"It's difficult for a woman working free lance to convince people she's worth the money she charges for public relations work," she said.

She added that an individual's opinion can influence the way business is transacted.

"IT'S HARD for a free-lancer to tell a man running a company how she thinks she can improve his business," Ms. Coughlin said. "A lot of men seem to think you're just some woman—that you're just doing public relations for pin money. Many men can't get beyond that."

While a sense of chivalry may cause an editor or television producer to give a woman a few minutes to present an idea, Ms. Coughlin said men tend to quibble more with women in public relations than with their male counterparts when payment is discussed.

"It's harder for a woman to convince clients that she's a professional and can make significant contributions to their businesses," she said. "And it's infinitely harder to command a fair return for work and collect."

ELLEN KAHN and Betty Matthaei, co-owners of Bettelle's, a new gourmet health food store in Birmingham, said that others in the health food industry took them seriously from the start.



BETTY MATTHAEI



VIRGINIA HYMAN

to making it a success, some of their male friends commented in surprise, "You really are serious."

"That gave them away," laughed Ms. Matthaei.

Some took the "you girls are just playing store" attitude, Ms. Matthaei said. Others "thought we were going into it because we had nothing better to do," Ms. Kahn added.

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They said their husbands and children encouraged them, but added that they encountered some condescension from male friends and from what they termed "the bureaucracy."

As Bettelle's began to prosper and the co-proprietors devoted long hours

Skeptics might have guessed from the three months of research the women did last summer that the business was more than a lark to them.

Before launching their venture, Ms. Kahn and Ms. Matthaei investigated various possibilities and gathered information at restaurant schools in New York and Michigan State University.

They concluded that their original concept of a fast-food health restaurant was not feasible, and settled on the gourmet health food shop.

GINNY HYMAN FOUND the reception of her oriental art dealership more encouraging. She opened the doors of Dulany's in Birmingham two years ago. A second shop is scheduled to open soon in Dallas.

As far as receiving different treatment as a woman in business, Ms. Hyman said, "I've never thought about it."

The sole shopper for Dulany's, she also handles pricing, inventory, cleaning and supervises the bookkeeping.

Although her husband, J. Leonard, is her backer, legal adviser and companion on buying trips, Ms. Hyman denies that she's "playing shop" while he runs the business. "I handle all aspects of the business," she said.

Buying excursions have taken her to mainland China six times and on numerous other trips to Asia and Europe as well. Even in the remote outposts to which her art hunts have taken her, Ms. Hyman said she never felt different because of her gender.

"As long as you are honest and as long as people feel they can have confidence in you, it doesn't matter who you are, male or female."

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