

Women Certified Businesses



Oftentimes women become entrepreneurs out of necessity. Others leave corporate positions for autonomy, flexibility and higher earning potential. Over the past decade millions of women have gone solo, yet the majority of these women-led enterprises remain small. Why don't women-owned businesses perform as well as they could? Do female entrepreneurs continue to combat gender-biased myths?

Mary Cantando, an entrepreneurial executive since 1989, is an expert on women's business initiatives who has a gift for tapping new revenue streams. Her Raleigh-based consulting company, Cantando & Associates, exclusively helps successful women business owners get to the table with their dream clients. *Business Leader* recently sat down for a Q&A with Mary Cantando to learn exactly what innovative approaches work for growth-minded small and mid-sized businesses.

Do you think that women business owners - in general - have a hard time dreaming big or planning big?

Most women have big dreams in their hearts, but don't know how to make them happen. Often women are able to build fairly successful businesses, but can't figure out the next steps to evolve their businesses from fairly successful to great.

How would you characterize your leadership style?

I help people do BIG things. My personal mission in life is to "enable others to experience abundance." That can be an abundance of money, of clients, of laughter, of friends...anything that is good. I focus on helping people discover that abundance. Even when negative things occur, I pause and ask: "How can we make this work for us, rather than against us?"

Why did you essentially end relationships with existing clientele to focus solely on a client base of women-led companies?

About a year ago, I woke up dreading that I had to spend the day with a particular client. That day, I vowed to work only with clients I really enjoyed from that point forward. As I thought through my client list, it just so happened that the ones I truly loved working with were the women business owners. So, I began to focus my energy around women-led businesses. As a result, I've got an amazing group of clients, and they're all my good friends.

What is the greatest obstacle to growth for women entrepreneurs? What is the greatest opportunity?

The typical entrepreneur is so busy working in her business that she doesn't work on her business. She's often so focused on this quarter, or this month, or sometimes even this week that she can't plan for and capitalize on opportunities. I've been preaching this concept of "working on your business" since I started CED's FastTrac program eight years ago.

These days, most entrepreneurs are under tremendous pressure to sustain and grow revenue, to keep existing customers and find new ones. One solution to this dilemma is for women entrepreneurs to become nationally certified by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC). National certification is a major sales channel that receives little attention. Although North Carolina has 170,000 women-owned businesses, fewer than 50 of them are WBENC certified. When I discovered this last May, I started a Carolina Forum for all the WBENC certified businesses in North and South Carolina. Since then, members have used their certification to break into accounts like GlaxoSmithKline, CP&L, Johnson & Johnson, Volvo, YUM! (KFC/Pizza Hut/Taco Bell), PepsiCo, AT&T, and other major corporations.

National certification is a classic example of how a woman can work on her business with great results. Continuing education and training geared toward her specific needs, such as our seminar series, is yet another.

No matter how successful a woman is, she needs to seek out interaction with women who are even more successful - this is her greatest growth opportunity. ■

WOMEN'S PRESIDENTS' ORGANIZATION TO LAUNCH FIRST CAROLINA CHAPTER IN RALEIGH-DURHAM

The Women Presidents' Organization (WPO) is a national organization of 400 highly successful women business leaders; the average WPO business has 84 employees and annual revenues of \$11MM. It represents the very top tier of women from across the country.

Marsha Firestone, president of WPO, reports that our region has 1,700 women-owned businesses with over \$1MM in annual revenue. She has recruited Mary Cantando to spearhead its launch.

"WPO members are entrepreneurial women who have excelled in their industries," says Firestone. "They each seized an opportunity and made it work. Our members tell us that attending a WPO meeting is the most important time they spend each month. The meetings give them an opportunity to work on their businesses by sharing expertise and experience from the other participants and returning to their businesses energized to continue their enormous demands."

WPO facilitates the visibility and accomplishments of women in leadership positions through PR efforts and alliances with important US organizations, such as the US Chamber, Women's Business Enterprise National Council and The White House Office of Public Liaison. WPO is frequently approached for referrals to speak at conferences, be interviewed by the media and join international trade missions.

For more information visit www.cantando-associates.com and www.womenpresidentsorg.com or call Mary Cantando 919-841-0401.