



## Business News

### Women form organization of peers to help each other's businesses grow

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By Donald I. Hammonds, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Sometimes the best helping hand is the one at the end of your sleeve.

As women who are presidents of their own firms make their mark in Pittsburgh's economy, they are finding that their best help, advice and encouragement comes from each other -- and that is the mission of the Women Presidents' Organization.

Pittsburgh got its first chapter of WPO, a national organization with branches in 20 major markets across the country and one in Toronto, about three months ago after Yvonne Campos of Campos Market Research Inc. attended a WPO national meeting in New York City.

The accessibility of the women in the national group, the discussion of substantive topics and the network impressed her enough to consider organizing a WPO chapter in Pittsburgh.

Nationally, the 400 women who belong to the organization control businesses with total revenue of \$4 billion, with 31,000 employees and 6,000 aggregate years of experience.

The women all are at the helms of their own businesses which, as required by WPO, gross at least \$2 million in annual sales or at least \$1 million for a service-based business. The membership fee is \$1,250 annually.

What might surprise Pittsburghers is the potential number of women in the region eligible to join the WPO. Several hundred both own and



Attending a recent meeting of the Women Presidents Organization are, from left, Audrey Reichblum of arPR and Knowledge in a Nutshell Publications, Georgia Berner of Berner International Corp. and Jaci Maher of Kwik Kopy Printing. (Lake Fong, Post-Gazette)

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operate their own businesses in this region and meet the WPO requirements.



As of now, the membership list includes Annette Ganassi, owner of A. Ganassi Pontiac/GMC Truck; Georgia Berner of Berner International Corp.; Jaci Maher, Kwick Kopy Printing; Elda

Sullivan-Numrich, Sullivan Chevrolet; Dorothy Andreas of the Sewickley Spa; Gloria Blint, Red House Communications; Becky Snyder of Franco Construction; Sue DeWalt, Metz Schermer & Lewis; and Audrey Reichblum of arPR and Knowledge in a Nutshell Publications.

The most important thing they had to determine was whether the local chapter was needed. An intensive focus group session suggested that it could serve a valuable purpose -- but a finely tuned one.

What they did not need, Campos said, was an organization that would home in on start-up skills and tools.

"Our emphasis is on making existing businesses bigger and better, and not just incremental improvements, either," Campos said. "Once you are established in the Pittsburgh market, there aren't many resources available to you to meet your needs as a woman in a second stage business."

One woman who is glad the local WPO chapter was formed is Georgiana Riley, president of Tigg Corp. Riley, who had worked at a management level position in the firm for years before buying it, joined WPO during the March meeting.

"I'm relatively new at this, and I need a lot of help. I see this as a chance to sit down and talk with other women to discuss problems and issues."

For all of the members, the learning process is enhanced by the fact that there are only a maximum of 20 members per chapter. As more women join, new chapters are established.

In Campos' chapter, each member provides an intensive, detailed presentation on her company so that everyone is familiar with the other members' companies and cantailor suggestions, advice and comments to each firm.

"You really get to know each other's businesses, and somebody's always gone through what concerns you," Campos said. "If you want to buy a building, for instance, there's somebody there at the meeting who just bought one, and they can tell you how to do it, what the problems are, here are the issues that came up, etc. They can tell you, 'If I had to do it all over again, this is what I would do.' "

Because the women honor confidences and value candor, discussions are "no holds barred" and usually get right to the point.

To foster such an honest atmosphere, the local chapter demurs from

having women whose businesses compete against each other; otherwise, it's feared few would want to "let it all hang out."

Suggested meeting topics from the national WPO reflect the organization's no-nonsense nature -- financing business growth; selecting and retaining employees; business expansion and planning; guerrilla marketing; defining business missions; public offerings; mergers and acquisitions and spin-offs; and Web site marketing.

"This isn't just a get-together and networking thing," Campos said. "It's a business solutions and leadership orientation. It's a real commitment that you are going to show up. You have three hours together, and it's important that you come to every meeting."

At a recent meeting, members discussed the challenges and benefits of working in Pittsburgh. Not a single one thought of Pittsburgh as a tough place to be a female executive.

"I know that neither I nor my partner has felt any bias toward women, but maybe I've been oblivious to it," said Gloria Blint of Red House Communications. "Although, we've wondered at certain times if perhaps if we had other individuals [men] with us, it would improve our chances."

"I've not felt any discrimination or felt it to be detrimental to be a woman in business. I knew what I wanted, and I went for it," said Dorothy Andreas of the Sewickley Spa.

But those views do not mean that Pittsburgh is somehow free of problems. "I would really like to see leadership here being more aggressive about promotion of women in every arena," said Eve Picker of No Wall Productions Inc.

"I'd simply like there to be more visibility of women at higher levels here," agreed Campos. "Does that keep me from doing what I'm doing? No. Would it help? Probably. Do I see enough women sitting on boards here? No. Do I see enough women in leadership roles here? No."

And the women complained about burdensome taxes in this region, particularly the city's business privilege tax.

More information about WPO can be obtained by calling Campos at her Downtown firm at 412-471-8484.

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