

Women in the Deli

Female owners thrive in male-dominated industry

By Brenda G. Russell

What is it like to be a woman heading a company today? The picture is improving, according to the Women Presidents' Organization (WPO), a New York-based non-profit organization for women presidents of multimillion-dollar companies.

Private U.S. companies on the list of female-owned firms—all founded by women or with female CEOs—posted annual revenue of \$82.7 million, up from \$45 million in 2009, WPO data shows.

Women-owned firms (those in which females own at least 50 percent of the company) account for 40 percent of all privately held firms, says the Center for Women's Business Research in McClean, Va. In their report, *Key Facts About Women-Owned Businesses: 2008-2009 Update*, they assert women own one of every five firms with revenues of \$1 million or more.

Despite the growth, WPO findings show women-led businesses may still struggle to access start-up capital. Respect and revenues, of course, must be earned by any business owner, regardless of gender, but they have been especially hard-won for women in the tradition-bound meat processing industry.

"Admit it, the industry is very masculine—its workers, the manufacturers' representatives, the chain store buyers," says Annie Levesque, president of Montreal-headquartered *Salaison Levesque, Inc.*, a family-owned firm that specializes in cured ham products for the retail and foodservice industries. "At first, my greatest challenge was on the road, checking out the newest machinery at international meat shows. Let's say I learned to speak louder!"

Levesque is just one of many females who have faced similar issues on the road to prominence in the predominantly male deli business world.

Modern Deli spoke with Levesque; Glenda Hoerstkamp, president of Double-G Brands; Brigitte Boily, partner at Viandes CDS; and Lorenza Pasetti, president of Volpi Foods to discover how they cleared the hurdles on their road to the top. Each of their stories illustrates how determination and hard work helped catapult these women to pinnacle positions in the competitive meat-processing profession.



GLEND A HOERSTKAMP

President, Double-G Brands

Headquarters: Pacific, Mo.

Number of Employees:

Between 30 and 45

Products: Whole, boneless and sliced varieties of hickory-smoked hams

Website: doublegham.com

"Soul searching" led Glenda Hoerstkamp to pass up a potentially lucrative management career at a shoe company to join the family's Double-G Brands meat company as her father's office manager in 1980.

She moved up the ladder until her promotion to president in 1992, and has never looked back.

"Years ago, as a female, it was more difficult to be taken seriously," Hoerstkamp recalls. "There was just a general underlying air of dismissiveness as I spoke with various people in positions of authority. This gradually diminished as they learned that I knew the business and had the authority to say 'yes' or 'no' when it came to their dealings with Double G. Once my knowledge of the business and my dedication to our products became obvious, I was treated basically the same as anyone else."

Hoerstkamp credits her father for successfully guiding her through the maze that was the meat industry three decades ago.

"He always told me to be prepared, to know our products and to follow through with whatever I told someone I was going to do. That advice has served me well through the years."

Hoerstkamp concedes not everyone would find such a hands-on role attractive. With sales "currently in excess of \$7 million," Hoerstkamp calls her job "an around-the-clock proposition.

"One of the main sacrifices is time," she says. "Many, many hours are spent at the office, not always from desire, but rather, because that's what is required."

But the moments she relishes outweigh the sacrifices. "I love it when the business is gearing up for the holiday season," Hoerstkamp says. "It is

especially exciting to see all of our production lines working at capacity, knowing that I have had a hand in securing the customers, ordering the products and filling those lines.”

Hectic? Yes. But rewarding, as well. “I sometimes meet myself coming and going, and feel I’ve taken four steps forward, but three steps backwards,” Hoerstkamp says. “In the end, though, it’s always worth it.”



ANNIE LEVESQUE

President, Salaison Levesque, Inc.

Headquarters: Montreal, QC, Canada

Number of Employees: 100

Products: Variety of smoked hams, ham steaks, ham cubes and nuggets, pickled pork roll

Website: www.salaisonlevesque.qc.ca

Annie Levesque thought she wanted to be a journalist. But after earning an international political science degree, she attended an event where young entrepreneurs were awarded prizes. “When I saw those young men—there were no women—I realized that taking back the family business could be a gratifying challenge,” Levesque remembers. “I thought, ‘If they could do it, why not me?’”

Levesque earned her stripes working in the plant, first in the packaging department and later as a buyer for machinery parts and packaging material.

“My responsibilities were subsequently increased to become the main buyer for all meat, ingredients and machinery,” she explains.

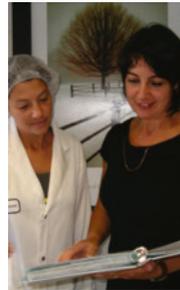
It was then she encountered some not-so-subtle discrimination. “When I first started to buy the big machinery for the plant I remember going to the booth of some retailer in a big international show and asking questions about some specific mechanical detail. My counterpart always gave the answer to the guy next to me. Some didn’t ever bother taking my business card to follow up,” Levesque says.

Thankfully, things have changed. “I have to say that time is over now. The meat industry is a small world and the key people of the business know me now. The new generation is also very different, and it’s all for the better!”

Levesque took on the president’s role when her father retired in 2003. And she continuously juggles business challenges with motherhood. “I am the mother of four boys, and organization is one of my great strengths,” she says. “As for rigor, I’m developing it. I work very hard at it because I believe it is a quality that is necessary to any entrepreneur.”

Accepting risk is also key to success in Levesque’s eyes. “It’s important for any entrepreneur to go ahead

and not be scared to make mistakes,” she concludes. “The easy path does not represent a challenge for me.”



BRIGITTE BOILY

Partner, Les Viandes CDS, Inc.

Headquarters:

Saguenay, Quebec, Canada

Number of Employees: 50

Products: Roch brand meat products including smoked and cooked hams, pepperoni, salami, smoked chicken

Website: www.viandescds.com

Brigitte Boily learned about gender bias in dairy—another male-dominated field. “Throughout my whole career, I have evolved in an environment of mainly men,” Boily says.

Boily worked for the Nutrinor dairy co-operative while studying food science at University Laval in Québec. “My first boss was the first one to believe in me and to give me a chance to prove myself,” she says. “He taught me everything he knew and gave me the opportunity to be promoted to positions with more and more responsibilities. I feel he showed me how to walk so I could run and be good at it!”

Boily spent 17 years at Nutrinor/Lactel. She joined Les Viandes CDS as plant director, and instituted processing improvements that quickly drew the owner’s attention. “He realized, even before I did, that I had the qualities and potential to follow in his steps as owner,” she says.

A new general manager, Jean Dostie, came aboard nine months after Boily’s arrival. “Our skills and competencies are very complementary, and our working philosophies were very similar,” Boily says. In 2005, they jumped at the chance to take over the business, and completed a management buy-out within one year.

“Five years later we have increased our sales from \$15 million to \$20 million; all our goals have been reached successfully and we are both very proud of what we have achieved,” Boily says.

Today Boily—who with Dostie recently wrapped up a \$1 million plant expansion—strives to be a mentor to her quality-control chief, also a woman.

What lessons does she draw from?

“I knew to stand out with the help of my self-control, competence, judgment, sensibility, dynamic character, courage and perseverance,” Boily says. “I can honestly say men have been a great support. Somehow being rare in the meat industry as a woman, you have to prove yourself.”

Boily belongs to the local business chamber and is a director of the regional food research center CINAQ. “Often, the challenges are the same for all leaders and