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Women-Owned Businesses Flourishing In Long Beach

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As the economy remains stagnant and small businesses are at the heart of the nation's and state's political debates, female entrepreneurs are taking it upon themselves to make sure their own businesses thrive. By using innovative marketing techniques and streamlining expenses, they stay fresh and attractive to existing and potential customers.

A recent study conducted by Catalyst, a non-profit research organization, found that more women are leaving companies to start their own businesses. A woman may embark on self-employment because she needs more flexibility, be unhappy in her work environment, feel the glass ceiling or feel unchallenged.

In 2008, women who owned at least half of their business made up 40 percent of all independent businesses in the United States. Those businesses generated \$1.9 trillion in sales and employed 13 million people across the country, the study said.

Another study by the Center for Women's Business Research found that in 2009, women-owned and operated businesses in Los Angeles, Santa Ana and Long Beach totaled 509,633. Those firms employed about 700,000 people and created \$129 billion in annual revenues.

Six diverse, women-owned businesses are holding their own right here in Long Beach. Some are new companies, and others are existing businesses that are expanding into larger spaces or opening additional locations.

Portfolio Coffeehouse Owner Kerstin Kansteiner

When Kerstin Kansteiner moved from Germany to Long Beach in 1989, she felt an element missing from Long Beach: a spot for locals to sit and enjoy coffee and spend time with friends. So she opened Portfolio Coffeehouse on the corner of 4th Street and Junipero Avenue. That was more than 21 years ago, and Portfolio is now a popular hangout for students, business people and local residents.

Kansteiner originally launched the shop as an art gallery. When she didn't see customers returning for the artwork, she began serving coffee, and patrons started hanging around and coming back. "It reinforced the idea that people need a place in their community to sit and chat," she said.

In the last two decades, the coffeehouse has offered poetry readings and live music, and it also sells magazines. Portfolio was the first hangout in Long Beach to offer rental computers, Kansteiner said. When laptops became the norm, she got rid of



the rentals and put in more electrical outlets and WiFi. She also provides large conference tables for business meetings and offers a knitting hour. Kansteiner opened Portfolio Annex down the street next to the Art Theatre in 2008, a tiny spot that offers coffee, other drinks and gelato.

Portfolio was still working out its kinks when Starbucks Coffee Company opened stores on almost every corner, she said. Starbucks offered consistent service and products, setting the bar for independent coffee shops. "They [Starbucks] came and did the advertising for us. They made coffee or espresso a marketable product. Starbucks has the huge budget and they could teach people what mocha, coffee or a blended drink is. We were actually riding on that wave, and trying to do the same if not better," she said.



Jill Pharis

Staying afloat during this recession is not as difficult as the one in the early 1990s, Kansteiner said, and it hasn't put a huge dent in Portfolio's profits. "We have actually seen an increase in our food sales, which we attribute to people not going to the high-end lunch places. People may just want a soup and salad and to have a small lunch at a bistro level and not the \$14 or \$15 business lunches anymore."

Kansteiner is the president of the 4th Street Business Improvement Association (BIA) and said community involvement is "just one of those things that is a complete must if you want to be a meeting place for the locals. Whether it's business or neighbors, you need to reach out to them and figure out what their needs are. If the street does well, I do well."

In the remaining months of 2010, Kansteiner has plans to open a new location downtown in the Lyons Art Supply building on 4th Street and Elm Avenue. The new coffeehouse will be in an open concept space, shared with Fingerprints Music. There is a trend for arts-friendly businesses there, she said.

In 2011, Kansteiner intends to continue looking for new trends to incorporate into Portfolio. The BIA will also propose some street improvements in 2011, including a bike corral, which replaces a car parking spot with parking for approximately 15 bikes.

Sweet Jill's Owner Jill Pharis

Growing up on a Nebraska farm with her German grandmother, Jill Pharis often enjoyed her grandma's freshly baked goods after a long day working in the fields. Pharis learned her grandma's recipes, and continued baking through college and her teaching career. Her passion for baking led her to opening Sweet Jill's on 2nd Street in Belmont Shore in 1987. Four years later Pharis opened another shop on Main Street in Seal Beach.

Sweet Jill's offers cinnamon rolls, muffins, cookies, cakes, brownies and pies. Pharis is involved in every aspect of her bakeries, including creating recipes and baking everything from scratch. "It's really important that we, as owners and operators, are hands-on and involved. The employees like to see you on a daily basis," she said. Some of her products change seasonally, with fruit pastries in the summer and pies in the fall.

Pharis touts the originality of her products. "What is very differ-

ent about my bakery is that it is old fashioned, unlike commercial supermarkets or Costco. They are unique items that customers won't get at any other place," she said.

Pharis is always keeping up with new trends and baking new products, often at the suggestion of her loyal customers, whom she calls her "bread and butter." When people became infatuated with red velvet cupcakes, she started making them. "People just famish for them," she said.

Since foot traffic has waned during the recession, Pharis keeps her shops busy by staying competitive with food commissaries, where independently owned businesses like coffee shops purchase products and sell them to their own customers. Sweet Jill's does not make wedding cakes, but it does provide desserts like cup-

cakes, chocolate dipped strawberries and brownies for large events. She also supplies her products – through wholesale accounts – to ice cream shops, Huntington Surf and Sport and the Long Beach Airport. She attributes her shops' success to their locations, especially the Seal Beach location, where people take advantage of the ocean because of the waves, she said. Pharis is also a member of the Seal Beach Chamber of Commerce.

The "Stroll and Savor" events in Belmont Shore are very beneficial for business, she said, because, for many people, it's their first time in the Shore. "I'm very grateful to be part of the Belmont Shore Business Association, because it really promotes the Shore."

Other than looking for new ways to entice customers, Pharis has several goals for 2011. She wants to create more wholesale accounts, and she is considering opening another bakery in Huntington Beach or Manhattan Beach.

Superior Foot & Ankle Care Owner Victoria Foley, D.P.M.

When Victoria Foley was studying kinesiology at UCLA, she became interested in sports medicine. More people were exercising and playing sports, which made podiatry a good market, she said. Since 1993, she has been providing orthotics, sports medicine and surgeries at her Long Beach and Los Alamitos practices.

After years of building relationships with her long-time patients, Foley gets most of her new patients through referrals. She sends out a newsletter quarterly by e-mail, lectures at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center and trains residents there and at Los Alamitos Medical Center. She also has a Web site, complete with educational podcasts



Victoria Foley



Kelly Dempsey, left, and Christy Pardini

and videos. “You don’t do the yellow pages anymore. My Web site is definitely taking that over,” she said.

Foley’s practice is down 16 percent in patient visits for the year, but she remains busy. “People are concerned because they don’t know what will happen with healthcare. . . . During stressful times, the body reacts, and you are forced to go to the doctor. People come in with more rashes,” she said. The main challenge Foley faces, because of the economic climate, is keeping the cost of care low, which she said, doctors do not learn in medical school.

Foley also networks with her surrounding communities. She is the vice president of the Long Beach chapter of the American Medical Women’s Association, which aims to advance the careers of female medical practitioners and improve women’s health. She is also a member of Soroptimist International, Long Beach, a non-profit volunteer organization for women in business.

Foley is also the clinical director for Fit Feet Special Olympics, which provides free feet, ankle and lower extremity biomechanics screenings for Special Olympics athletes. “Every June we have an event at Cal State Long Beach for the summer games. This year was the biggest event we ever had, and we gave shoes away,” she said.

Foley has big plans for 2011. Not only will she convert her paper medical records to electronic ones, she also wants computers in each treatment room and digital x-rays. She currently refers physical therapy patients out, but she plans to hire a physical therapy assistant so she can provide her patients with physical therapy in her office. She is also considering purchasing a medical building.

Bella Cosa Owners Kelly Dempsey And Christy Pardini

While creating products for their children’s clothing company June Bug, Kelly Dempsey and Christy Pardini met many vendors who used recycled items for their own handmade products. Thus emerged Bella Cosa Boutique, where Dempsey and Pardini sell

vintage antiques and products made with recycled and repurposed materials by local Long Beach artists and vendors. “They have this quality to them that you won’t find in something that is mass-produced. People come in here and find things that are unusual, funny, witty and one of a kind. Someone will tell us that walking around the store makes them smile,” Pardini said.

After searching the various districts in the city, the women chose to open their store in Bixby Knolls. “Working up here with the Bixby Knolls Business Improvement Association... It has been a wonderful experience. They have done nothing but help us and push us by getting people to look at our store,” Pardini said.

Not all materials used in Bella Cosa’s products are “green,” but the owners believe that purchasing items from neighbors is also a good way to stay eco-friendly

since the goods are traveling locally versus via cargo ships from China. The store also offers fair-trade products, which provide safe working conditions, fair wages and strong employment opportunities to disadvantaged artisans and farmers.

Outside Bella Cosa, Pardini is a graphic designer and Dempsey is a teacher, so they have not had to rely on the store to pay the bills, although they have seen increased sales every month since opening in November 2009. Bella Cosa’s prices are “really decent,” Dempsey said, and since they sell consignment pieces from local artists, their markup is less than if they purchased items wholesale. “We have nothing to compare it to in terms of sales numbers from a previous year, but I don’t believe people traveled this summer, and from a sales perspective, we had a good summer,” Dempsey said.

Bella Cosa will celebrate its one-year anniversary on November 5, and the owners anticipate a busy holiday season. Once the New Year starts, Pardini and Dempsey hope to finish the classroom inside the store, where they will host jewelry and soap-making classes, among others.

ETA Advertising Owner Cindy Allen

While working as a Long Beach police officer, Cindy Allen was injured and underwent back surgery. Rather than returning to the force, she retired and went back to school. She received her master’s in public administration in research database marketing at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), and in 2005, she launched ETA Advertising.

The firm started out with a focus in real estate developers, Allen said, but when the recession hit, she worked hard to diversify ETA by going after what she calls “verticals,” instead of focusing in one industry or media. Competing with established ad agencies was challenging, but ETA focused on companies that were still healthy and acquired accounts like Farmers and Merchants Bank. “We



Cindy Allen

were doing a lot of traditional advertising like TV, radio, signage and print. We moved into Web site development and interactive media. When we saw that [companies'] budgets were being decimated, we went online. That is what has kept us alive," she said.

Allen, a small business advocate, is a boardmember on the Long Beach Chamber of Commerce. She works with nonprofits and interacts with the local business community in Downtown Long Beach, including Downtown Long Beach Associates, Queen Mary Island, Aquarium of the Pacific and the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra. "I call this 'my little big city.' I love these businesses, and it breaks my heart to see businesses on Pine Avenue close. As much as I can, I try to get involved with new businesses and support them," she said.

Since ETA operates within the city's Enterprise Zone, which enhances businesses by providing state tax credits, and because Allen is a loyal 49er, she often hires recent CSULB graduates to intern at ETA. "These 'Millennials' are the smartest generation that we have ever produced, and what they bring to the table is amazing. I'm always looking at that talent," she said.

The firm just transitioned from its Walker Building office to a space twice the size, also on Pine Avenue. Allen wants to grow her business and is investing in new technologies to keep up with the ever-changing advertising industry. "The main goal is to really look at landing more accounts and making a bigger name for ourselves in Long Beach. One of my biggest goals in this area is to become the go-to agency for [businesses in] this area," Allen said.

Just Alterations Owner Liz Bordessa

What started out as a joint business venture between two sisters 25 years ago, Just Alterations has evolved with

the fashions and now provides its customers with more than new hems and inseams. Liz Bordessa, now a sole proprietor, offers fashion consulting for patrons who want more from their outdated wardrobes. "We've tried to find a niche in the tough economy with how we can help people," Bordessa said. "They are being much more value conscious." With its tenure in The Marketplace shopping center, Just Alterations has survived previous recessions, although the current slump has lasted the longest. "I think a lot of it is being flexible and understanding that change is a natural part of business," she said.

The majority of Just Alterations' business consists of casual styles and denim jeans. They also get 20 percent of its business from bridal dress alterations, and since brides only wear their dress once, Bordessa is working on a program that will encourage brides and bridesmaids to donate their dresses back to the shop so the garments can be given to high school girls in search for prom dresses.

Business is down 20 percent, but Bordessa has not laid off employees or lowered her prices. To keep her business attractive to customers, she restyled her store the way she restyles old suits, she said. She revamped her Web site and updated her shop's furniture. She also redesigned her logo, business cards and signage. "Times like these weed people out. If you're good and have a good clientele, people will be loyal," she said. ■

(All photographs except Dr. Foley's are by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)



Liz Bordessa