

Women Speak Out About Their Role in the Industry



● Robin Daly has achieved success as vice president of Daly's Paint and Decorating Center as well as Daly's Wood Finishes in the Seattle area.

Regardless of how you feel about Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin, there's no question that these high-profile politicians and their supporters have recharged dialogue about the role of women in the workplace.

Have things changed since the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s? This is the question being asked subtly

and not so subtly in print publications, blogs, Internet chat rooms and other outlets.

Writing for *New York Magazine* (April 13, 2008), Amanda Fortini had this to say about Hillary Clinton's bid for the White House: "The Speaker of the House is female, as are eight governors and 16 percent of Congress...Many

women believed we had access to the same opportunities and experiences as men—that was the goal of the feminist movement, wasn't it?—should we choose to take advantage of them... Then Hillary Clinton declared her candidacy, and the sexism in America, long lying dormant, like some feral, tranquilized animal, yawned and revealed itself."

Certainly some things have changed over the years, including the number of women in the workforce. According to the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, roughly 16 million jobs have been created over the past decade, and women have secured nearly half of them.

But how are women perceived and treated in the workforce? Do they still encounter the proverbial glass ceiling? Or is it a thing of the long-gone past?

What about in our own industry? Have women been able to find a secure place within paint stores and manufacturing facilities, one in which their con-

tributions are valued and respected?

PDR decided to try to find the answer by informally surveying women retailers, company managers, executives and others in the industry. We wanted to learn if the industry has changed in its acceptance and advancement of women and to hear about women's own personal experiences.

Respondents had mixed things to say, from one woman who believes nothing has changed over the years to another who stays too focused on business to notice to one who said gender bias is mostly a thing of the past.

However, most respondents fell somewhere in the middle. They noted that while working conditions certainly have improved for women over the last few decades, there are still pockets of prejudice.

Women retailers, for example, reported that male customers still refuse their help from time to time—even though the women have years of experience—but will accept it from a less experienced male employee.

Sometimes women retailers also reported being bypassed by suppliers at trade shows or even in their own stores, who assume that the women's husbands are the store owners and responsible for all of the business decisions.

Nancy Pittenger has owned Melrose Paint and Decorating Center in Wakefield, Mass., for 34 years and to this day is mistaken at times for “the retailer's wife,” she and her husband, Fred, reported.

Fred left his own career 15 years ago to help Nancy in the office. When people come into the store and mistake him for the owner, he sometimes surprises them when he says, “We're definitely not a partnership. She's the boss. It's her business.”

Fred noted that much of this mistaken identity happened in the early years before Nancy became so well-known. He remembers going with Nancy to trade shows and being approached at booths. “People would come over and ask, ‘Do you carry this

product in your store?’ and I'd say, ‘I haven't a clue,’ ” he recalled.

Nancy has learned to take the snubbing in stride. But she admits that she's felt the pressure to be at the top of her game and has worked hard to maintain a sterling credit rating with all of her suppliers.

Today, when someone in the industry makes a gender gaffe, Nancy gives them some friendly advice: “You can do it to me, but you'd bet-

of the painter, the co-worker would have me approve the color. So we had our fun with it,” she said.

Women retailers aren't the only ones who have had to contend with misconceptions because of gender. Female executives at manufacturing companies reported similar experiences.

Michele Margotta Neary, public relations director for United Gilsonite Laboratories, knows her company's product line inside out.

“When I was younger, many times a customer saw me and asked for ‘one of the guys’ to help him.”

ter not do it to someone else or you might lose business.”

Adeline Smith, owner of Old Western Paint in Denver, grew up in the business. Her father owned the store before her, and Smith by the late 1970s was working the paint counter.

Still, “When I was younger, many times a customer saw me and asked for ‘one of the guys’ to help him. Usually my male employee would turn to me to answer the question the customer asked him,” she said.

Retailer Robin Daly, of Daly's Paint and Decorating Center as well as Daly's Wood Finishes in the Seattle area, had similar experiences while working at a home improvement center in college. Years later, she's uncertain whether the biases were due to her age or gender, but neither were warranted since Daly was raised in her father's paint and decorating business.

Daly, who was 18 years old at the time, actually was hired at the home improvement center because of her paint-store experience. “There I ran into a little sexism. . . There would be older painters who wouldn't want me to tint their paint or create a custom color match for them. So the job would pass to another co-worker. But then, in front

Nevertheless, “In the beginning of my career at UGL, I would have to be the only person not talking to a customer before someone would approach me for information. I would ask, ‘Can I give you more information on that product you are looking at?’ and they would say, ‘No, I am just looking.’ Then they would politely keep looking until a male counterpart would ask the same question,” she said.

Margotta Neary said men in the industry tend to “come around” once they realize a woman actually knows what she is talking about. “I do think this is getting better. Men are becoming more confident with what women have to offer,” she said.

Women suppliers also reported being called derogatory names at trade shows. One of them was Valerie Rumrill, vice president and chief financial officer of Dripless Inc.

“At a trade show a few years back, a gentleman came through and made the comment to my husband that he had ‘a mighty fine heifer there,’ referring to me, which was irritating and so utterly out of date we just shook our heads,” she said. “But generally, even though I sell products that can lend themselves to sugges-

Women's Perspectives



Adeline Smith

"I believe we give a different perspective than men do, and I use that to my advantage."

Adeline Smith, Owner and President
Old Western Paint Co. Inc., Denver



Nancy
Pittenger

"I tried to be the best I could and I worked hard. I read technical magazines, talked to clients and went to trade shows. I felt I had to get a wealth of information because I couldn't say, 'I don't know.'"

Nancy Pittenger,
Owner Melrose Paint & Decorating Center,
Wakefield, Mass.



Monique
Rogers

"Our marketing was completely revamped after I came on board and is directed specifically at women. Most recently, I spearheaded a new campaign to help women and their families. Modern Masters now donates a portion of the proceeds from every container of our Metallic Collection sold to 'help the fight against Breast Cancer.' We wanted to help our customers and by supporting Breast Cancer (research), we can help entire families."

Monique Rogers, Director of Planning and Marketing
Modern Masters



Michelle
Quaranta

"I've definitely had to work harder but not because of gender. When I entered the market in 2006, I was building two brands ..."

Michelle Quaranta, Owner
Colori Chicago, Chicago



Janice
Nachbar

"My first job was as a cashier in a lumberyard. As I worked my way up to assistant manager, I learned how to drive a forklift and a flatbed truck. It was not required but necessary to 'compete' with the men ..."

Janice Nachbar, National Director of Sales,
Roman Decorating Products



Valerie Rumrill

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Valerie Rumrill
Vice President and CFO, Dripless Inc.



Michele
Margotta
Neary

"When I first graduated from college, I worked for a plastics manufacturer, and we would go to different sorts of trade shows. So many companies had showgirls working at their booths. It seemed the only place for women in the building industry was (in a booth) wearing a short skirt and a tank top."

Michele Margotta Neary, Public Relations Director
United Gilsonite Laboratories



Robin Daily

"I was raised to be on the 'softer' side of things. So I wasn't even interested in working behind the paint counter when I was younger. I was much more into the interior design side of the equation."

Robin Daly, Vice President
Daly's Paint and Decorating and Daly's
Wood Finishes,
Seattle area



Erika Woelfel

"Up until the late '90s, anything associated with the building industry used to fall within the realm of men. When paint started being viewed more as a fashion accessory and less as a commodity, people started taking note of how women shopped for paint and color. The whole strategy changed for many companies."

Erika Woelfel, International Color Marketing Director
Colwell Color Studio

tive comments, people are very respectful and encouraging."

Sheer Numbers

A sign that the industry is becoming more accepting of women is

their sheer numbers in the marketplace.

Several decades ago, women in the industry were relatively scarce. In paint and decorating stores, they tended to be bookkeepers and decorators.

In corporate offices, they were secretaries and receptionists.

But now, women increasingly are store owners and managers, sales reps, department heads, product engineers and corporate executives.

Today, “I can walk into a paint department and see women mixing paint behind the counter,” said Erika Woelfel, international color marketing director for Colwell Color Studio, “and I think that’s great! Up until the late ’90s, anything associated with the building industry used to fall within the realm of men.”

Woelfel said the real turning point occurred when paint started to be viewed more as a fashion product and less like a commodity, and the industry starting taking note of how women shopped for paint and color.

At that point, “The whole (marketing) strategy changed for many companies,” she said. “Women had usually been designers and marketers, but then you started seeing them in the labs and in upper management roles as well.

“Suddenly, merchandising paint wasn’t about putting a bunch of chips in a display rack with no signage and saying, ‘Best of luck picking one!’ It was about capturing imagination and emotion. It was about adding style and appealing to personality. This was very much a transformation from the old way to the new.”

In the mid 1990s, paint companies also began introducing designer lines and heavily promoting them to women. Designers like Ralph Lauren and Martha Stewart departed from their clothing and kitchen lines, respectively, to capture this new market and put their well-known plumes on paint labels.

Other companies likewise created fashion paint lines and designed new color centers, with women as the marketing focus.

“For the first time, you saw gorgeous photography in color cards, helpful signage on display racks and lots of literature that made selecting the right paint color easier,” Woelfel said. “Since women make most decisions for purchases in home décor, it was especially important to enlist their aid when developing programs.”

Sundries soon followed suit. Packaging became more attractive, POP materials often showed women tack-

ling projects, and products began to be more ergonomically designed to fit into the smaller hand of a woman.

As time passed, women not only began purchasing paint, sundries and other decorating products in greater numbers, but they began selling and manufacturing them in greater numbers, too.

Women also began painting and paperhanging, and in the intervening years they have continued to join the ranks of “journeymen.”

“Women have excelled by getting training, working job sites and creating some spectacular finishes.”

“The old-school painter mentality has changed dramatically,” said Monique Rogers, director of planning and marketing for Modern Masters Inc.

In fact, “I don’t believe that is prevalent anymore. This is mainly due to the fact that women have excelled quickly in the area by getting training, working job sites and creating some spectacular finishes. They have shown that they aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty or to climb a scaffold and have earned the respect of their male counterparts,” she said.

Rogers, who began in the industry as an administrative assistant and class technician for Ritins Studio, said women still encounter bumps in the road, particularly at the corporate level.

“When dealing with coatings companies at an executive level, I mainly encounter men. There are minimal women at this level,” she said. “I would love to see more female directors, vice presidents, general managers and presidents.”

Working Harder

While women have entered the industry in growing numbers, some survey respondents reported that they had to work harder than their male coun-

terparts, particularly in the early years of their career, to receive the same respect, status and pay.

Janice Nachbar, national director of sales for Roman Decorating Products, started as a cashier in a lumberyard. She worked her way to assistant manager and learned to drive a forklift and flatbed truck—though the job didn’t require these skills — just to “compete” with male co-workers, she said.

Nachbar even memorized the entire

inventory of products. Still, “I often felt I was not taken seriously or was looked at as some sort of a gimmick or as an answer to affirmative action,” she said. “It just made me work harder.”

Nachbar became so good that truckers would come in and ask for “the girl who drives the forklift,” she said. Nonetheless, she had an operations manager who felt women didn’t belong in a lumberyard and constantly tried to trip her up on product knowledge.

Eventually, Nachbar was fired, just as she was ready to be promoted. “Due to performance, I was scheduled to be a store manager next, and the other middle management people (men), all of whom were there longer, had threatened to quit if I was promoted ahead of them,” she said. However, “The firing worked out well for me,” she added, “since a distributor hired me immediately, and I have worked steadily in the industry ever since.”

In the early days especially, women in the paint and decorating industry were reluctant to show any chink in their armor. They often felt “put on the spot,” and whether that feeling was justified, they worked hard to make sure they were never found lacking.



Retailer Nancy Pittenger remembers, “I tried to be the best I could and I worked hard. I read technical magazines, talked to clients and went to trade shows. I felt I had to get a wealth of information because I couldn’t say, ‘I don’t know.’”

Daly felt the pressure after she took over the business from her father. Daly’s father, Jim, co-owned and -operated the store for many years. After his death, Daly and her husband purchased his portion of the business. Herb Paulson, Jim’s partner, continues at the store as president. Daly is now vice president.

At the time Daly came on board, employees knew her “as the daughter of the boss and someone who was a decorator,” but Daly had never worked the tinting machine or made color matches.

“I was raised to be on the ‘softer’ side of things. I wasn’t even interested in working behind the paint counter when I was younger. I was much more into the interior design side of the equation,” she said. “So I didn’t exactly have street credit with the paint department. My task was to carve an identity that was separate from my father’s.”

Over time, Daly proved herself in the paint department—and even brought on a new paint line that has been extremely lucrative for the store.

Regardless of gender, “When you’re working on leadership, communication and creating a sense of stability and reliability are important,” Daly said.

There are Advantages

Over time, Daly has come to believe that being a women store owner has advantages, since women tend to make the majority of shopping decisions and are prime customers for her store’s custom paint lines.

Additionally, “I do enjoy the fact that my gender gets me noticed,” she said. “It helps me stand out from the crowd.” Daly, in fact, plays up her gender in a blog that she writes about paint and decorating. In it, she refers to herself as the “Paint Princess.”

Like Daly, Margotta Neary said there

are advantages to being a woman in the industry. “Most men like women,” she said, “and they are more polite to a woman than a man. Therefore, sometimes more doors are open to us, where they might not think twice about shutting down a man . . .”

Rogers of Modern Masters pointed to other advantages. “In the decorative coatings field, 90 percent of the customer base is female—meaning, by the time our product is applied, a

My store’s Colori and (a high-end brand), which I am still building. It’s been a challenge to introduce a premium paint product that designers and painters are not all that familiar with.”

Quaranta believes it’s important for young women entering the business to offer customers something other retailers aren’t providing, whether that is a product or service. “You need to stand out and create a niche,” she said.

One respondent, who asked to re-

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woman has had a hand in specification, the purchasing decisions or the application,” she said.

As a result, “I think I can better identify with our customer base and have a better idea of what will appeal to them,” she continued. “Our marketing was completely revamped after I came on board and is directed specifically at women now.”

Most, though not all, survey respondents said they believe gender is becoming less of an issue as time goes on.

Women have proven themselves in business, they said, and the bottom line of the ledger has become far more important than gender.

“If you’re smart about business, it doesn’t matter if you’re male or female,” Daly said matter-of-factly.

Chicago retailer Michelle Quaranta, owner of Colori Chicago, might agree. Quaranta opened her boutique paint store in May 2006 without any preconceived notions about gender bias. It was her first job in the paint industry, and she hit the ground running.

Like other survey respondents, Quaranta said she has had to work hard—“but not because of gender,” she said. “When I entered the market in 2006, I was building two brands:

main anonymous, said that gender isn’t the tipping point any more—age is. She sees younger workers being sought for their ideas, while older workers are dismissed as “old-fashioned,” even though they have much to contribute.

Is age the new workforce battleground? This is a talking point that also is gaining more coverage as John McCain continues his race to the White House.

Regardless, the key for women—men—of any age is to stay up-to-date in their respective areas of business, suggested Smith of Old Western Paint.

Smith said she was only accepted in business after she proved herself by building a reputation for product knowledge and customer service. At this juncture, she believes both her gender and her age are serving her well.

The crux of the issue? “Customers want people—men or women—who can solve their coating problems,” she said.

Rogers of Modern Masters said she would tell younger women entering the industry in 2008, “Know your stuff and utilize your natural ability to multi-task to get results. We are all evaluated on our results, so by delivering timely, positive results, you can’t be overlooked.” ■