

# Nova Scotian Female Entrepreneurs: Making it Work at Home and Abroad

BY WENDY R. CARROLL & CONOR VIBERT

RECENT STUDIES IN CANADA INDICATE THAT SMALL BUSINESS GROWTH IS A DRIVING FORCE behind our economic development and that female entrepreneurs are leading the way. [1] For example, the number of female entrepreneurs in Canada continues to rise faster than their male counterparts and has done so for nearly a decade. [2] This higher trend of female entrepreneurship has been attributed to numerous factors including different approaches by women to leadership and management styles. [3] It has been suggested that female entrepreneurs are motivated more by personal reasons such as flexibility, work-family balance and passion rather than by money alone. [4] Other studies suggest that this trend towards female entrepreneurship is largely driven by the slow process in which women break through the “glass ceiling”, as evidenced by the staggeringly low number of women in executive offices and at board room tables.[5] Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that more women are successfully engaging in business ventures of their own in Canada.

Small business growth is also a vital part of Nova Scotia's economic development. As with the rest of Canada, female entrepreneurs within this region are taking a leading role. As part of a recent project for Acadia University's video database speaker series, we sat down with a number of female entrepreneurs from Nova Scotia to talk about their businesses and experiences. We talked to Christine Bower, Vice President of the Wooden Monkey and a restaurateur focused on local and organic cuisine, and Cassandra Dorrington, President of Vale & Associates and a human resource management consultant working both nationally and internationally, to get their thoughts on business and female entrepreneurship.



Christine Bower,  
Vice President  
Wooden Monkey



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SO WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO START YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

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The motivation for the Wooden Monkey actually was inspired by my partner Lil MacPherson who is the President of the Company. She had a dream to open a restaurant based on serving local and organic foods with an emphasis on a healthier style of living. I, as well, had a dream of owning my own restaurant. We had worked together previously for a number of years and she came to me and provided me with an unbelievable opportunity. So basically, it began with a dream and a plan. Her plan was to get the place and then find partners. So she approached me and we became partners. Lil, Robie Sagar and I moved on to make this dream a reality.

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CAN YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS?

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Initially our business was dedicated to people that were health conscious or vegetarian or into organic or local food. We had a smaller market and then we marketed ourselves to become a place with something for everyone. So basically now our market has changed. We now have children, older people and students all alike.

For us, people are a very important part of our business. Our philosophy, when it comes to our employees, is if you continue to make them comfortable, happy and relaxed they will want to be there. It makes everything easier this way. If you walk around and you're not positive or enthusiastic and don't have a good sense of humor, or if you take yourself way too seriously, they don't want to be there. They won't care about the product they put out, they won't care about the plates, and whether or not your customers are happy. They may be more inclined to just walk out the door and not clean anything, and that is an important part of this business.

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WHAT WERE YOUR KEY CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES DURING THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF YOUR COMPANY?

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People's perceptions about our product and service have been one of the biggest challenges because they perceive it as an organic restaurant, I guess, as kind of 'hippyish'. We had to try to become very much mainstream with very non mainstream menu items, and trying to get into that market is difficult

Christine, born and raised in Halifax, is Vice-President and General Manager of The Wooden Monkey restaurant in Halifax, a restaurant based on serving local and organic products with a philosophy of supporting the community and the environment. In addition to The Wooden Monkey, Christine is Operations Manager of a rapidly growing company, Inspired Landscaping & Renovations.

Christine has extensive restaurant industry experience combined with a background in management, marketing and accounting. With her start in the industry almost 20 years ago at the front line level, Christine quickly moved upwards bringing her schooling and professional training to each new project, providing innovative and cost effective business management strategies. Christine has traveled throughout Canada, honing her business management skills in properties from casual to fine dining.

enough but that is complicated by getting your name out there. We found this to be very challenging.

Also, at the beginning of opening a restaurant money is basically a big challenge. But first and foremost, in this type of business, experience is key. You could have all the money in the world, and not know how to run a restaurant, and it will fail. In the first year, eight out of ten of these types of businesses fail. So you need to have experience, knowledge and a good relationship with people to make it work. But even with these key ingredients, the banks didn't help us at all. We had to put all of the start up costs and daily operations costs on our own credit cards, and our lines of credits. We took the risk because banks don't look at you for years.

Christine is known for consistently bringing passion, hope and determination to every project or challenge presented. In 2006, Christine was recognized by her peers and was added as a Board Member for the Restaurant Association of Nova Scotia. The Wooden Monkey was awarded "Best New Business of the Year 2006" by the Halifax Chamber of Commerce and she was an award presenter at the 2007 Chamber of Commerce Metro Halifax Business Awards. Also in 2006, the restaurant was a finalist in the Better Business Bureau's Ethics Awards.

Outside of her professional career, Christine, a proud mother of two, is active within the youth development community by volunteering as a coach and instructor within the Metro Basketball Association.

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AS A FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR STARTING YOUR OWN BUSINESS WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES YOU FACED?

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I think females have come along way. In fact, in the restaurant industry it has been mainly men previously. But I don't feel this pressure and it certainly hasn't hurt us as female restaurateurs in this particular case. People may be surprised that you are one of the owners or you are an entrepreneur because I think that they assume it is going to be a man. But I don't really feel it and I try not to focus on it. I'm determined to make it work and that's what keeps me going.

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WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS GETTING READY TO START A NEW BUSINESS VENTURE?

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Be strong, be determined, be passionate, be enthusiastic, be positive, and don't take no for an answer. I believe that with both companies and banks, whether you are trying to get financing or trying to market yourself. You hit a lot of roadblocks and you are constantly faced with no, no, no. You may actually feel sometimes like you're not going to get the yes, but if you keep going and keep positive there is always a way, there is always a way.

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WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK WOMEN'S NETWORKS AND ASSOCIATIONS PLAY IN THE SUCCESS OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS?

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I think that these networks provide a sort of a community feeling for women so that they can achieve their goals. Also, they provide a forum to connect with good role models. Women can look and see other women who are achieving their goals so you don't feel so discouraged. I am a mom as well, so I have a little more to balance and that often comes with being a woman. There is a little more involved. However, I think that it creates a good outlook. You can respect and look up to somebody and feel confident. In addition, women's networks also provide help. You know at the Wooden Monkey we received a grant from the Women in Business Initiative [6] for a software package that is very very expensive, but it is essential to have for costing in our business.



Cassandra Dorrington,  
President Vale and Associates  
Human Resource Management & Consulting



Cassandra started her own business after a rich 20 year career in human resource management and accounting. Cassandra Dorrington is the President of Vale & Associates Human Resource Management and Consulting Inc. Prior to starting her own business, Cassandra worked in the high-tech, telecommunications, and consulting industry with organizations such as Aliant Inc., xwave, and Deloitte Consulting. Cassandra specialized in Human Resource Advisory Services, Employment Equity/Diversity, and Training and Development and has provided consulting services to a number of national and international clients in the private, para-public, public and not-for-profit sectors.

She is a graduate of Saint Mary's University with a Bachelor of Commerce and a Master of Business Administration Degree (Executive Program).

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SO WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO START YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

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Vale & Associates was started back in March of 2004, and basically I had always wanted to do consulting work. It was an ideal time in my life professionally and personally to actually step outside the corporate environment and create my own consulting business.

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CAN YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS?

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My company specializes in providing Human Resource Management Services and consulting to small to medium-sized companies. I focus on these clients because many of them are in the early stages of development and look externally to engage HR expertise. So as these companies continue to grow they are looking for the expertise and infrastructure that will support their business model. We also have a contingent of large scale clients who have HR inside the organization but, given their requirements for special projects, they look to bring expertise from external consultants to deliver on those projects.

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WHAT WERE YOUR KEY CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES DURING THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF YOUR COMPANY?

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The key challenges for me in developing Vale & Associates were:

- 1) Do I specialize or provide generalized consulting services?
- 2) How do I drive the market once I decided upon the specialization? and
- 3) As a small consulting firm, how do I balance between the business development side and the actual delivery side of the business?

So for me, those were key challenges. My success in developing the business was a direct result of utilizing the networks that I had amassed during both my corporate career and my consulting period as a starting point for moving into my own consulting business.

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AS A FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR STARTING YOUR OWN BUSINESS WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES YOU FACED?

A

I am an accountant by profession. I overlay on top of that 20 years of corporate experience. I am working in a basically female-driven environment when you think of human resources. So on the one hand, the fact that I come as an accountant into human resources is an advantage. It is distinctly different from the traditional view of what people think of as an HR professional. So that has been a challenge trying to mesh the human side of business with the financial side of business. On the other hand, the opportunity is because I have the accounting background coupled with the human resources consulting background, I have been able to leverage this dual specialty when speaking with executives in helping them understand how human resources can add value to the bottom line. ○—

REFERENCES

1. Shaw, R., *Small Business is Driving Growth and Women are In Control*, in The Globe and Mail. 2005: Toronto.
2. Beauchesne, E., *The growth in women entrepreneurship in Canada*, in CanWest News. 1999. p. 1.
3. Bass, B.M. and B.J. Avolio, *Shatter the Glass Ceiling: Women May Make Better Managers. Human Resource Management (1986-1998)*, 1994. 33(4): p. 549.
4. Mainiero, L.A. and S.E. Sullivan, *Kaleidoscope careers: An alternate explanation for the "opt-out" revolution*. Academy of Management Executive, 2005. 19(1): p. 106-123.
5. Catalyst, *Latest count of women in Canada's largest businesses shows marginal progress*. 2007, Catalyst: Toronto.
6. *Editors Note*: When fact-checking this piece, we discovered that the Women in Business Initiative (WBI) has undergone some changes since the owners of The Wooden Monkey were able to make use of the program. Formerly an Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) program, the WBI is now administered through the Centre for Women in Business at Mount Saint Vincent University. For further information visit the Centre's website at <http://www.msvu.ca/cwb/>

Cassandra has obtained her CMA (Certified Management Accounting) designation as well as her CHRP (Certified Human Resource Professional) designation, and most recently, acquired her Certified Master Coach designation.

In addition to her wide range of experiences in the business world, Cassandra's community involvement has garnered her the Commemorative Medal for the 125th anniversary of Canadian Confederation and the YWCA Woman of Distinction award for Community Service.

Currently Cassandra sits as the Chair for the Black Business Initiative, Treasurer of Techsploration (an organization that works to promote young women in non-traditional roles in trades and technologies) and a member of the National Board of Directors CMA Canada.

Profiles:

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