

December 27, 2006 Build a better plan

REDI contest helps female entrepreneurs get businesses off the ground

By [LOUIS LLOVIO](#)

louis.llovio@mddailyrecord.com

Mary Moslander had an idea. So, like any entrepreneur, she took that idea and went looking for money.

The more Moslander pitched her idea, though, for creating a networking Web site for people wanting to live healthier lives — a MySpace.com for the wellness world — the more she was asked the same pesky question: Is this a nonprofit?

A former marketing executive for an interactive Web company, Moslander knew her idea was solid and profitable. Why then was she being repeatedly asked by potential investors and banks whether her business was nonprofit?

After hearing the question enough times, she went to a former client and potential investor she hoped to snare and asked him.

“Well, it’s a health and wellness company,” Moslander said the investor answered bluntly. “And you’re a woman.”

The people she was talking to simply assumed that she was not interested in starting a for-profit company.

It seems that Moslander had run into a new kind of glass ceiling, one based not solely on gender but on expectations.

Despite the initial resistance to her idea, Moslander entered and won the Rockville Economic Development Inc.’s 2006 StartRight! Competition and subsequently launched her Web site, livehealthier.com. Since then, she has partnered with several corporations and today has 5,000 members enrolled.

Creating the plan and winning the contest were keys to that success, she said.

“There is a balance you need to have as an entrepreneur,” Moslander said. “You must be passionate but at the same time you can’t be so enamored by that, you are blinded to change.”



Entrepreneur Sequoia Ramsey will enter a business-plan competition with a plan she has to start a company that will handle staffing and desktop publishing needs for IT companies.

For Sally Sternbach, executive director of Rockville Economic Development Inc., the initial reaction to Moslander's idea wasn't entirely a surprise.

As one of the first female managers at AT&T in the early 1980s, Sternbach said she is accustomed to women being held back because of low expectations.

"I sit next to women at meetings all the time, doctors and scientists, and I ask them all: 'When are you going to start your own business?'" she said. Most are surprised by the question, she said, because they've never considered starting their own companies.

While fully capable of becoming entrepreneurs, women aren't conditioned to want to start businesses, Sternbach said.

"Women are not expected to start businesses and be entrepreneurs," she said, "and we fulfill those expectations" when they don't start companies.

Sternbach set out to change that attitude four years ago.

Through REDI she began the StartRight! Women's Business Plan Competition, a business-plan writing competition to help women who are just beginning the process of starting their own businesses. Sternbach said the idea was to focus on business plans because it is crucial to the foundation of a company.

"Businesses with a plan," she said, "are more likely to succeed."

REDI announced the 2007 competition last week.

Sternbach said teaching women interested in starting businesses how to prepare proper and well-thought out business plans will give them a leg up when it comes time to launching their companies.

"It's not just an academic exercise," Sternbach said. "A successful business plan will help you garner resources, recruit good people and prepare financials."

Sternbach and a panel of judges evaluate the entries. A plan is judged by its caliber, not the quality of the idea, she said. To help the entrepreneurs further, first prize in the contest is \$10,000.

Hoping to cash in on the \$10,000 first-place prize next year is Sequoia Ramsey.

For Ramsey, entering into a male-dominated world is nothing new for her. "I may be the opposite," she said, "all I ever wanted to do was start a business."

She said the lure of entrepreneurship is that "you get to find value in your achievements."

She will enter a business plan for a company that will handle staffing and desktop publishing needs for IT companies.

While undaunted by the challenge, Ramsey understands she is more of an exception than the rule. She said while men are raised to be competitive and aggressive, women aren't brought up the same way.

"We don't say, 'I'm the best,'" she said. "But that's the way to be successful."

Ramsey, who already operates Realistic Computing Inc., is convinced that women can be taught otherwise though.

She said that over time she has learned how to be more aggressive when it comes to pricing and in negotiations.

According to the Center for Women's Research, entrepreneurs like Ramsey are beginning to become the norm. As of 2006, there were 7.7 million women-owned businesses in the U.S., employing 7.2 million people and generating \$1.1 trillion in sales.

In Maryland, 167,107 women-owned companies employed 223,760 and generated \$32 billion in sales. Overall, statewide, women-owned businesses make up over 32 percent of all companies.

The StartRight! Women's Business Plan Competition is open to businesses that are at least 51 percent women-owned, in business for less than two years and operating in Maryland, Virginia or Washington. For more information on how to apply, visit www.rockvilleredi.org.