

# Women business owners share ideas and support

Article by: TODD NELSON , Special to the Star Tribune

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The Women Presidents' Organization has five local chapters and a waiting list of those who want to join.



**From Left to Right: Rose McKinney of Pineapple Reputation Management; M. Marie Bak of SDQ; Lindsey Bruber of Simek's; Myrna Marofsky of BWC; Sue Hawkes of YESS!; Katie Greeman of Spill the Wine, and Beth Kieffer Leonard of Lurie Besikof Lapidus.**

Photo: Joel Koyama, Star Tribune

Lindsey Bruber, president and owner of Simek's, the venerable Twin Cities frozen food purveyor, was struggling to decide whether to pursue national distribution of the company's meatballs, lasagna and other entrees.

Bruber, 28, had grown up with the family-owned Simek's, founded in 1972, and has ambitious plans for its growth.

She only bought the St. Paul Park-based food company in June 2010, after working in marketing roles there for a few years.

But Bruber also had joined a local chapter of the Women Presidents' Organization (WPO), a nonprofit that sets up confidential, professionally facilitated peer-advisory groups for women presidents, CEOs and managing directors of private, multimillion-dollar companies.

She sought advice from chapter members when a leading national retailer proposed a big distribution deal with Simek's. After presenting a case study and getting guidance, particularly from WPO members who had faced similar decisions, Bruber turned down the offer.

"It's been the best decision I've made," said Bruber, because it avoided jeopardizing existing customer relationships and because sales growth has been strong thanks to other input from WPO members.

"The opportunity to be part of WPO and learn from a group of such intelligent and accomplished women has been beyond inspiring," she said.

Bruber's words reflect a common sentiment among local WPO members, which may account for the organization's popularity here. WPO has about 100 members in five Minnesota chapters, trailing only New York and California. In all, the New York-based WPO has more than 1,600 members nationally and internationally.

"Minnesota has something unique going on," said Myrna Marofsky, who chairs three WPO groups here. "I think it's the quality of the women and the quality of what happens in the meetings."

Marofsky, who runs consulting firm Red Book, became a WPO member when she was co-owner of a diversity-consulting firm that worked with Fortune 500 companies. Sue Hawkes, an employee engagement consultant and business coach, chairs the other two local chapters.

WPO chapters typically consist of 20 women, Marofsky said. Members must have \$1 million in gross yearly sales for service businesses or \$2 million for other companies. Sales at WPO member companies here average \$8 million and go up to \$100 million, Marofsky said. Members must have some level of ownership or senior management responsibility. Chapter membership is \$1,800 a year.

### **Demand is heavy**

WPO has a waiting list of Twin Cities' businesswomen who want to join, Marofsky said. In 2010, Marofsky launched The Business Women's Circle, an independent organization that prepares prospects for WPO membership. That organization has more than 40 members meeting in four groups.

At monthly WPO meetings, the focus is on business growth, education and professional development, not networking, Marofsky said.

"There's a commitment to each other's success because we hold each other accountable," said WPO member Rose McKinney, founder and CEO of reputation-management agency PineappleRM. "If we talk about something you can be darn sure that somebody's going to ask how that went or what can I do to help you or say here's a resource."

Interacting with businesswomen from a mix of industries and with varying experience levels is part of the value McKinney finds at WPO meetings.

WPO offers a supportive environment rather than a competitive one, Marofsky said, adding that women have a more holistic view of doing business, and typically seek to balance professional and personal responsibilities.

WPO member Marie Bak, founder and chairwoman of commercial cleaning services company SDQ Inc., said she had rarely met other businesswomen before joining but felt WPO members accepted her even though she didn't have a business or entrepreneurial background before she started her company.

"It's a safe place for a woman like me," Bak said. "It's a place where you can grow."

Educational opportunities at monthly meetings and WPO conferences have appealed to WPO member Beth Leonard, managing partner at the Lurie Besikof Lapidus accounting firm. The firm serves as WPO's corporate sponsor and frequently hosts chapter meetings.

"It's proven to be an incredible resource," Leonard said. "The value for me personally and anyone that participates in it is gaining insight on best practices across all disciplines, in all businesses, and having a safe place to talk about issues."

**The expert says:** Jack Militello, management professor and director of the health care MBA program at the University of St. Thomas' Opus College of Business, said part of the value of peer-advisory groups such as the Women Presidents' Organization is in offering executives a confidential sounding board that otherwise may not be available.

"It's more comfortable entering into the business dialogue" with other women, Militello said, paraphrasing a comment from a female consultant on the St. Thomas staff. "The way men enter into the business dialogue can be a little abrupt."

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