

idea corner

Women in Business

The county home economics agent appeared on the television screen, sandwiched between the *\$1.98 Beauty Show* and *Dolly Parton*. "Who provides the most new jobs for the local economy," she challenged, "the major corporation or the Mom and Pop corner store?"

The public service announcement (PSA) went on to explain that small business generates the vast majority of new employment opportunities across the United States and that more and more women are joining the ranks of American entrepreneurs. In spite of the hefty competition, the PSA got its message across, as close to 200 women jammed the lobby of an Albany, New York, hotel for a Women in Business Conference sponsored by Cooperative Extension. This conference was one of a highly successful series initiated by Cornell University in predominately rural areas in New York State.

Women are, by and large, an untapped economic resource. Their

entry into the economy is just beginning to be recognized. Women entrepreneurs have the same problems any small-business owner faces, compounded by particular difficulties. Women still feel discriminated against by loan institutions; very often personal money is used for business expenses.

Women need and call for some kind of networking system of mutual support. Very often they don't know what resources are available to them on the local, state, or federal level. Extension can act as a catalyst between women, resources, and information. For the Albany conference, regional counties pooled the talents of agents to plan, publicize, and provide speakers for the event. Direct mail flyers, newspapers, Extension newsletters, and word of mouth brought excellent attendance.

Evaluation reports stressed that workshop speakers should be primarily women—personal experiences of other women starting out and practical hints on how to keep going were much appreciated by the audience. Canned speeches should be avoided.

Subjects covered may include legal forms, recordkeeping, financing, planning, marketing, time management, or other topics of particular concern to businesswomen in the region. The surest way to determine these concerns is by direct contact and by listening. Care should be taken not to prejudge these needs, so background work is important.

Prior contact with local businesswomen's groups not only provides ideas for topics, but will lead to workshop speakers and panelists as well. A planning committee of agents, businesswomen, and co-sponsors was helpful in Albany County. Local banks sponsored clients, provided supplies, or paid for advertising.

Using local resources such as the banks, the Farmers Home Administration, and accounting firms helped alert these institutions to the growing economic market provided by women and to the problems that they encounter. It also gave them a new look at Extension programming, creating a reservoir of goodwill in the business community.

A Women in Business Conference is a step leading to further programming. Indeed, there's certain to be a call for follow-up, in-depth classes. Another almost certain call will be for a network system of support for women.

Cooperative Extension can meet this need in several ways—some counties have published directories of women-owned businesses, others have used the conference wrap-up to suggest the formation of a Small Business Advisory Council for Women. Extension need not get heavily involved in the council itself, except to provide the opportunity for women to meet and discuss the idea.

Women entrepreneurs are a growing economic force. They also offer a new audience for Extension programming, an audience that's enthusiastic and appreciative. Extension is in a unique position to offer low-cost classes, workshops, and resources needed by this group. In meeting the special needs of women in business, Extension can contribute to the healthy economic growth of the local community.

MARILYN E. ROTHSTEIN

*Coordinator, Special Projects
Community Resources Development
Albany County
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York*