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4 ways businesswomen can combat bias

By [Jeff Wuorio](#)

Arment Dietrich is a 10-person public relations firm in Chicago. The company's Web site lists Charles Arment as chairman of the board.



One slight wrinkle — Charles Arment is about as real as the tooth fairy.

Why the ruse?

"At least once a week I'm asked, 'Where's your husband?' says president Gini Dietrich. "It got so bad that I created an identity for Charles Arment. I figure why fight the battle if the perception is that a man needs to be running the business?"

Funny, yes, but troubling, too. Dietrich's scheme begs the question — Does bias still exist against women in the small business world? Answer: Is the Pope Catholic?



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Look under the proverbial microscope, the only reasonable conclusion is that bias is, indeed, still alive and well in the business world for women. It's subtle, but there.

As a result, women business owners and entrepreneurs need effective strategies to fight this discrimination.

On one level, bias can mean little more than discomfort — as is the case with Dietrich. In some instances, her male clients are simply ill at ease with dealing with women. It may seem a minor headache, but that attitude can make it difficult for women-owned businesses to establish their professionalism.

"As a business that's strategy-focused, I regularly experience bias on the part of male clients who appear reluctant to accept that a woman can deliver meaningful contributions," says Beth Zimmerman of Cerebellas, a Long Beach, N.Y., consulting firm. "That makes it very challenging for women-owned companies like my own to elevate their visibility."

Occasionally, discomfort morphs into condescension or derision. Small business author and consultant Frances McGuckin recalls a Rotary Club auction where she and other women donated items.

"For some of us women, our products were bid at an insulting amount compared to their real value — other items were bid well over their value," she says. "When they went through the history of Rotary, there was a chorus of insulting comments when they talked about when women were first admitted. I left the event early and was quite hurt. It jaded my opinion of Rotary and what it stands for."

Another form of subtle bias is the perceived scope of women-owned businesses. Dr. Marsha Firestone, president of the Women's President Organization, says that many consumers assume such businesses to be small potatoes — little more than quaint avocations run from a kitchen table in between diaper changes. That can be yet another hurdle to establishing competency.

"The stereotype is a woman who runs her business — often a craft business — is doing so in her spare time from home. That's not accurate," she says. "Today, women own businesses in all industries, and their revenues and numbers of employees are equal to those of male-owned businesses."

That skewed view can have pragmatic consequences, particularly in terms of getting financing, credit or other financial necessities. Donna Richards, who owns a mobile home dealership in Rome, Ga., says the deeper the male tradition of a particular industry, the tougher it can be for a woman to address even the basic mechanics of business.

"There was a banker I went to see about a line of credit. He reviewed my perfect credit score and my financials — I netted \$3 million last year. Then he asked where my husband was," she says. "There is no crying in the trailer business because it's a good old boy's game. And, yes, there's a lot of prejudice."

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But it's also evident that conditions have improved on a number of fronts. Marcia Layton Turner, author of "The Unofficial Guide to Starting a Small Business," agrees that bias still exists but that several factors have diminished its impact.

"Women-owned businesses are far more common today. Also, women running small businesses have a tremendous track record of success, which gives others credibility," she says. "And, as the next generation of women rise into positions of power, they have a different perspective on women in business than their predecessors did. I think they're more willing to treat women business owners on par with men who own businesses."

Still, bias against women can sting. Here's a checklist of ideas that may help:

- **Prepare exhaustively.** If you're applying for a loan or line of credit, be sure to have as comprehensive portfolio of information about your business. Facts can override stereotypes and skew assumptions.
- **Don't try to be "one of the guys."** Instead, emphasize manners and professionalism. It's more effective but some men may harbor resentment with a woman who's trying to join in at the old boys' club.
- **Take advantage of opportunities.** If a reticent client or prospect agrees to meet with you, come in ready to perform beyond expectations. Says Zimmerman: "I work very hard to get at least one opportunity, however brief, to demonstrate my worth and the credibility of my company."
- **Hit back at stereotypes.** If a customer assumes yours is a small operation, share financials that show otherwise. Outline your network of contacts that demonstrate your strength and varied capabilities. And what of the ersatz Mr. Arment, the male PR executive who exists just this side of the Easter Bunny?

"Most clients think it's a brilliant idea," says Dietrich. "By the time they become clients and experience our expertise, it's no longer important that a man should be running the business."



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Jeff Wuorio is a veteran freelance writer and author based in southern Maine. He writes about small-business management, marketing and technology issues. Send Jeff an [e-mail](#).

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