

The Green Bottom Line

How environmentally conscious, women-run companies do good *and* do well

BY LAURA ORLANDO

THE TRADE-OFF BETWEEN social good, the environment and profits isn't really a trade-off anymore—it's an excuse. Just ask Sonja Ebron, CEO of blackEnergy in Atlanta.

Her company, founded in 2001, secures energy for black communities, using collective buying power to negotiate some of the lowest natural-gas rates in Georgia. Moreover, it sends some of its profits back to non-profit organizations in its customers' communities. And since the company anticipates that access to energy will get much tougher because of climate change, Ebron—who has a doctorate in electrical engineering—hopes its efforts to locally produce power will help “ease the transition to low-energy living” for its customers.

Or ask Judy Wicks, whose White Dog Café in Philadelphia buys as much local, organic food as it can, thus supporting local farm economies. Buying organic also addresses global environmental concerns, since organic soils hold 15 to 28 percent more carbon dioxide than nonorganic soils (excessive carbon in the atmosphere is responsible for global warming). Finally, when the lights go on and ovens are lit at the White Dog Cafe, it's wind power delivering the electricity.

As for the bottom line, Wicks—who started modestly selling coffee and muffins out of her Philadelphia home in 1983—now runs a \$5 million operation with over 100 employees (including the cafe's affiliated store, the Black Cat). “Our mission is to service our customers, employees, community and

nature. I see profits as a tool, not the end mission,” Wicks explains.

Finally, ask Cheryl Zimmerman, CEO and president of the marine electronics company FarSounder in Warwick, R.I. The sonar technology developed by her company helps boats see underwater in three dimensions—thus helping to protect whales and coral reefs from ship strikes. And unlike other sonar technologies, FarSounder uses an environmentally friendly frequency that doesn't harm marine life, according to Zimmerman.

FarSounder's sonar systems were codeveloped by Zimmerman's son, Matthew, and his mother—an engineer—got involved when large oil companies began to show an interest (the technology can help prevent tanker collisions). She went to friends, family and individual “angel” investors for start-up capitalization, but other women entrepreneurs tap *institutional* investors (mutual funds, investment banks, pension funds, etc.). And there are plenty with a social consciousness to tap.

In 1984, when the Social Investment Forum conducted the first industry-wide survey to identify institutional (rather than individual) assets put into socially conscious investing, it came up with a total of \$40 billion. This money was going to companies invested in the “double bottom line”—promoting positive social values while increasing profits. Today, nearly \$2.29 trillion is involved in socially responsible investing—one out of every 10 dollars under professional management in the United States—and that investing

increasingly focuses on a “triple bottom line,” with environmental stewardship elevated to a third metric for measuring corporate performance.

One of the places women entrepreneurs can seek out institutional capital and link to “angel” investors are venture fairs—such as those sponsored by Investors' Circle, a network of investors focused on the triple bottom line, and Springboard Enterprises, an organization dedicated to helping women get started in business. “Springboard was a very good education for me,” says FarSounder's Zimmerman. “You hear about women, some of them against all odds, running small companies.”

And these women are talking more



and more to each other, joining local networks of green businesses, and then even larger networks such as the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE). Cofounded by Wicks in 2001, BALLE is a nationwide association of 52 local business networks representing over 15,000 entrepreneurs, many of them women. BALLE is helping provide a blueprint for a “living economy”—built around local food and farming, green construction, locally owned independent retail, zero-waste manufacturing, community capital and renewable energy.

For Wicks, one of her motivations to network around a triple-bottom-line living economy was the sale of Ben and Jerry’s to the multinational corporation Unilever in 2000. Suddenly, one of the prime models of a

responsible business was gone—as, subsequently, were Stonyfield yogurt (sold to Dannon), Odwalla juice (sold to Coca-Cola), Cascadian Farms (organic foods, sold to General Mills) and, most recently, the Body Shop (natural cosmetics, sold to L’Oreal). “The problem seemed to be,” Wicks says, “that we continued to use the same measure of success as the traditional economy, which is to continue growing bigger and bigger and bigger. In the end, we were just adding to the concentration of wealth and power that we had formed the movement around to change.”

Companies like those owned by Wicks, Zimmerman and Ebron remain agents of change, operating on the belief that environmental and social consciousness can create satisfac-

tion in the soul *and* the wallet.

“Creating social change is the only way to build a successful business in the long term,” says Ebron. “While profit-oriented businesses aim for profit, and nonprofit organizations aim to provide services, social enterprises aim for both. There is no trade-off for a successful social enterprise, because its business plan is designed to create wealth *by* doing good. And focusing on the bottom line helps ensure our social goals are met.” n

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