

The New Frontier: Women Leading the Charge in the Environmental Arena

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Perfectly positioned on the forefront of a rapidly growing sector, women are finding increasing leadership opportunities in a variety of sectors within the environmental industry. The White House Council on Environmental Quality is chaired by Nancy Sutley, the Port of Los Angeles has transformed itself into a clean technology testing ground due to Executive Director Geraldine Knatz, and Martha Wyrsh, president of Vestas Americas [VWS.CO], has launched 50 North American facilities for the world's largest producer of wind turbines. These are but a few examples of women who have charted a new course in established, traditional sectors.

Forbes profiles the "[Top 12 Women Of Clean Tech](#)" and describes the industry as "one of the most dynamic sectors in the world — hot start-ups, technological whizbangery, cutthroat competition, billions in venture-capital investments, a race against the climate clock." This colorful but accurate description, combined with the fickle economic climate, provide the perfect storm for impassioned entrepreneurs to make a play in traditionally male-dominated industries that range from architecture to transportation to waste management. The article also points out that although women are still a minority in many of the industry sectors, they are slowly gaining in the leadership realm.

At the annual Women In Green Forum held in Los Angeles, the NWBC hosted focus groups to take the pulse on the challenges and opportunities available to women entrepreneurs who want to grow their "green" businesses. The results revealed high expectations for women in this field and found "the sector holds particular promise for women," noting that women are more apt to "work collaboratively" and towards a greater good. These qualities, along with the progressive and contemporary nature of the green sector, are allowing women to cross traditional gender barriers and succeed in business. Full focus group results are available [online](#).

The growth in this field is promising yet the challenges women face as business owners in general readily transfer to those launching clean tech enterprises. One leading clean tech venture capitalist and CEO, Nancy Floyd of Nth Power, recently described her frustration with the low number of women in clean tech C-level positions. Floyd told the audience at the Women

In Green Forum that “of the over eight thousand business plans that we have seen ... maybe two dozen have had women CEOs.”

Floyd’s comment provided a wakeup call to those in attendance and for me personally. After years of climbing the ranks in the environmental consulting world, I embarked on the entrepreneurial path. In 2008, I launched Three Squares Inc., a woman-owned and operated sustainability consulting firm. The firm grew at a steady pace and it became clear that eventually the time would come when additional capital or strategic partnerships would be required to scale up to the next level. I committed myself to creating the relationship capital required to prepare for the next stage of growth. Additionally, I started the process for registering the firm for federal contract opportunities. These two steps helped lay the foundation for expanding the firm to attract greater contract opportunities. The final step involved accessing technology to help address the challenge innate to scaling a professional services company.

Scalability of a business relies heavily on the type of product sold – in my case, we sell consulting hours. It is much easier to scale a business which sells widgets or software licenses than it is to scale a services firm – in essence, you have to sell more hours which involves training more specialized staff to perform the work. Being able to bottle your consulting service and sell it to the masses is the same challenge that many small business owners struggle with on a daily basis. I remain hopeful that there are enough innovative women entrepreneurs in the field that are willing to take on the process I have outlined above in order to balance the scales.

Although women have made a significant impact in the environmental industry and other emerging fields, we still have a long way to go. Increasing access to capital and providing educational opportunities for women business owners are chief priorities for the National Women’s Business Council. On the federal stage, the newly adopted Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Federal Contract program authorizes contracting officers to set aside certain federal contracts for eligible women-owned small businesses. This opens the door to a near \$4 billion worth of federal contracts opportunities.

Clearly, the time is now for women to take a leadership role and go after opportunities in the green building, clean transportation, alternative energy, and broader sustainability arena. The NWBC seeks to be just one more avenue to provide a bridge to these opportunities.