

GLASS CEILING

IN AN IRON WORLD

“Honey, can I speak to your boss?” We laughed aloud when we heard a woman manager for a fitness equipment company tell us about the time she was told that on a sales call with a potential male customer. But what were we laughing at? It was a sad statement on the retail fitness industry that a woman was assumed not to be the boss.

This, in an industry that tosses around the figure that 80 percent of purchases are made or highly influenced by women. Seems that selling to them is one thing, but recruiting, promoting or encouraging them as executives, owners and high-placed managers in non-stereotypically female positions is an entirely different matter in many fitness firms.

This story is about a business arena that, for such an innovative one, seems to remain in the lower percentiles of industries with women in positions of clout. We don't have exact figures. They in fact don't exist since the large research groups don't study the industry or break it out in any way even if it was included. So we started asking around, up and down the fitness food chain, men and women, manufacturers and retailers. Answers were mostly long pauses, a few ummms, and a bit of hemming and hawing as the dusty corners of various brains were ransacked to find a name of a woman, past or present. Sometimes a few names came to mind. Sometimes none. Many laughed a little nervously and said something similar to what one industry long-timer told us, “I have been racking my brain, trying to identify some women in the industry. I'm very sad to say, I am having a hard time coming up with any to add to your list.”

Fitness claims to make much of its equipment for women or to please women since they are a huge percentage of users and buyers. Yet when GearTrends® stopped and looked around, what did we see? Stores

owned nearly exclusively by men, stores managed nearly exclusively by men, product managers and designers nearly exclusively male, and top executive ranks nearly totally male-dominated. Yes, there are women, but they are mostly found in the stereotypically female places such as human resources, bookkeeping, executive assistants, marketing and public relations. CEOs? One. National sales managers? One. Regional sales managers? A sprinkling you can count on a few fingers. Retail ownership? No more than one hand needed to count independent female owners and that includes the United States and Canada. Other vice presidents and decision-makers NOT in the stereotypical places? Oh so few.

“It's ironic our industry is driven so much on the sales side by female customers, but that there are still so few females involved in any level of the business,” said Chip Hunnings, retail co-owner of All About Fitness, Lifestyle Fitness and U.S. Fitness Products.

“Yes,” he added, after a pause to ponder the situation, “it's still a boys' club.”

GearTrends® decided to talk to a few of the women in leadership roles about how they got there, what they have faced, and what they still face, as well as how society as a whole has—or has not—progressed in letting women climb the ladder in the corporate world.

FITNESS STILL NOT ALONE

Not to say we are picking on fitness. Even Ann Dugan, associate dean of the University of Pittsburgh Katz graduate business school and executive director of the Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence, called the fitness industry “not out of the norm.” Catalyst, a non-profit membership association that has been tracking, researching and educating about women in business since 1995, notes that as of 2006 only 1 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs were women, 15.6 percent of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies are women, and women fill only 9.9 percent of the total line positions held by corporate officers compared to men who fill 90.1 percent. (Line positions are those with revenue-generating or profit-and-loss responsibility.)

Catalyst's 2006 figures also note that of the manufacturing industry's 168 companies polled, 14 percent of directors were women and an average of three women were corporate officers of an

average of 21 in each company. Using the same research, of the retail trade industry's 62 companies surveyed, 18.1 percent of directors were women and an average of four women were corporate officers of an average of 23 in a company.



SportsArt's
Reina Reeves



Could fitness even match those numbers? We're not convinced. And perhaps not being "out of the norm" shouldn't be good enough for fitness.

To make sense of the trend, Catalyst noted: "At the current rate of change, it will take women 47 years to reach parity with men as corporate officers of Fortune 500 companies."

"It's about fixing the workplace and changing long habits and assumptions about women, especially those who are mothers," Lauren Stiller Rikleen, an attorney and mediator, executive director of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success, and author of "Ending the Gauntlet: Removing Barriers to Women's Success in the Law," told GearTrends®. The assumptions about what women can or can't do, she said, "is a societal-imposed notion and it's based on a workplace model that is outmoded."

Granted, the fitness industry is young, and most of its companies are only 25 to 30 years old. And its roots can be traced back to he-men such as Arthur Jones, Jack LaLanne and even Arnold Schwarzenegger who grunted and sweated in grungy gyms equipped with big pieces of iron and steel, and whose male images impacted an entire generation of pre-pubescent boys and teens. Look around: Many of today's leaders in the industry are between about 40 years and 55 years old, give or take a few. Ask around: Many got into fitness because they were into working out or were on a sports team in school, and were duly impressed with honking huge Nautilus machines, LaLanne towing boats with his teeth, and Arnold's buff chest, not because they were necessarily business-minded, although many became good businessmen. Remember, the federal Title IX sports equality act wasn't enacted until 1972, and aerobics didn't become a big deal until about then either, so many baby boomer women didn't have the opportunity to be participants.

"In the early 1980s, I was publishing a regional magazine on bodybuilding and fitness," said Scott Logan, director of marketing at SportsArt Fitness. "Many of

my advertisers were fitness stores, which were all started by men. The proprietors seemed to fall into two camps: One, men who were bodybuilding, weight lifting or fitness buffs who opened stores because they had an interest in or passion for fitness. And, two, men who thought that selling health was a good business opportunity."

The dominance of male ownership, he added "has essentially stayed that way."

HONEY...

The women in fitness leadership roles—in the sampling GearTrends® talked to—didn't all get there along the same path. A number were into working out in some way, perhaps on a team, such as Lynette Kowalke, Western regional sales manager for True Fitness who played softball in college. Others were involved with individual sports, such as former triathlete Leisure Fitness owner Katina Geralis, or self-proclaimed gym rat Reina Reeves, national sales manager for SportsArt Fitness. An interest in business, sales or finance made this industry an easy one for them to consider with their sports/fitness interests. A number of others were simple entrepreneurs with few ties to fitness but perceived it as a business opportunity, such as Johanne Tummon, owner of Canada's Physical Assets store. Several just moved into the fitness world from another industry—think of Accell Fitness CEO Alison Powers—

taking on the same sort of financial or managerial roles they held in other market segments. That trend has begun to happen only in the last few years as fitness has grown beyond being a mom-and-pop industry into one that offers the potential of personal and professional growth and the ability to attract both men and women with a solid resume and experience.

"My passion was always fitness," said Geralis, who worked for another store



Accell's Alison Powers

before deciding she could do it better. That's partly thanks to her family. Her father always told her she could be anything she wanted. In fact, supportive parents who said things like "be all you can be," greatly influenced many of these leading women

in the fitness industry. Geralis opened her first store with a small business loan in 1995, noting, "I didn't have much to lose because I didn't have anything!" Today she is the No. 1 Precor dealer, has 17 stores in five states and is still growing.

Kowalke, one of the younger women in the industry, majored in exercise science, managed health clubs and on a whim in her late 20s sent a resume to Cybex for a sales position although she had no experience in equipment sales. She was hired and has been in the industry ever since. She believes that being in team sports helped her with the drive, competitiveness and team-playing needed to succeed in a male-dominated industry.

Reeves has been in the fitness industry since the mid-90s, starting at Hoist Fitness although she knew really nothing about the retail side of equipment after working in financing for equipment leasing. One of the pre-Title IX women in fitness (she graduated from high school after its enactment), she was a gym rat. She's been the national sales manager at SportsArt Fitness since September 2006, only four months after starting there as the manager for the Western region.

Powers, the highest-placed woman as CEO of Tunturi and Bremshy parent Accell Fitness NA, worked in various financial positions, when by chance in 2003 she talked to the owner of Wynne, the former Tunturi distributor in Canada and saw potential for the fitness industry. She became CFO for Wynne International before it was bought by Accell in early 2005, after which she was named CEO of The Netherlands-based company's North American branch. But ensconced on the business side of the company and still new in fitness, Powers said she didn't realize how female-poor the industry was until the first time she went to the Health & Fitness Business show in Denver and saw all the guys in the aisles and booths.

Already in retail, Tummon of Physical Assets heard about the growing fitness retail industry in 1984 from her brother, John Tummon, who was Wynne's owner. She took a look around and didn't waste a minute. "We saw it as an opportunity," she said, and one that could be perfect since she loved the hands-on retail environment.



Leisure Fitness' Katina Geralis



WEB EXTRA! To read an additional story on how another industry's women banded together 14 years ago to form a successful business association, an added benefit for SNEWS® subscribers, go to www.geartrends.com/extras. "How Another Industry's Women Proved They Were The Boss" is an insightful look at a few women in the outdoor industry whose desire to share their concerns and experiences spawned a non-profit organization that has raised overall awareness.

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After 23 years in the fitness retail business, she indeed seems to have found her home.

There are others, of course, sprinkled here and there, but not many. You might assume that, even though few women hold high ranks in the fitness industry, many can be found in entry-level positions such as customer service or retail sales staff. But this is not the case. Hunnings, a retail owner since the early 1990s, said, "I've had two (women sales staff), and it's embarrassing it's only been two. ... No doubt about it, a woman salesperson could do very well dealing with both genders."

CAN I SPEAK...

We seem to spawn our own biases, however, both inside and outside the industry. Tummon, of Physical Assets in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, said if she and a male salesperson are standing at the counter and a customer approaches the desk, they will generally direct their question to the man. And when she receives communications from the fitness trade itself, it is almost always addressed "Dear Sir."

Interestingly, however, is that none of the women we talked to had few, if any, stories of outright prejudice, meanness or hostile interaction. The tales they shared usually stemmed from misunderstanding or illustrated a common theme—that they still have to prove themselves more than men and must over and over earn the right to be there. Geralis noted that a manufacturer's representative asked her just a couple of years ago when she was already well-established, "What's the name of the guy who runs your company?" Her response: "You're looking at him." Kowalke said she has sensed she was being tested by male store sales staffers when they started prodding extra hard about motors, belts and other technical information that is stereotypically a guy's forte.

Obviously, it helps to be bold, confident, a tad thick-skinned, and ready to assert yourself, although that in itself can sometimes make men uncomfortable or even cause a backlash. "When a man asserts himself, it's positive," Reeves noted. "When a woman asserts herself, she's a bitch."

Yet, only the strong survive—and those with a sense of humor: Geralis actually has a set of small Everlast boxing gloves hanging from her rearview mirror to represent the battles she has to fight. "You definitely can't be a shy, meek person," Tummon said. "You have to be very sure of yourself."

Kowalke, with her background in team sports, related her attitude to what was ingrained in her in softball—work with everybody, perform for the team, take one for the team, and practice, practice, practice

so you don't disappoint. "You have to work with everybody to get to your goal," she said. "You may not even like them, but when you're on the field, you're a team. And you have to perform or you'll let somebody else down."

Although the research and education group Catalyst argues that the stories about how women lead and manage differently from men are good press, those stories remain dangerous. In a 2005 report called "Women Take Care, Men Take Charge," Catalyst wrote that the stories reinforce perceptions that are rooted in gender stereotypes—"perceptions that maintain the gender gap in leadership itself."

"These stereotypic beliefs spill over into the workplace, posing an invisible and powerful threat to women leaders. Gender stereotypes portray women as lacking the very qualities that people commonly associate with effective leadership," Catalyst wrote. "As a result,



True Fitness
Lynette Kowalke

they often create false perceptions that women leaders just don't measure up to men in important ways. Unless organizations take steps to check this powerful bias, women leaders will likely be misjudged—no matter

how high their levels of preparation and aptitude for corporate leadership roles."

In fact, the Catalyst researchers analyzed more than 40 studies about leadership characteristics and found very little difference between men's and women's leadership. Both men *and* women said they considered women better at "take care" behaviors such as supporting and rewarding, while both men and women considered men better at "take charge" behaviors such as delegating and influencing upward. Even some of the women of influence in fitness we talked to mentioned a woman's ability to nurture more, pay more attention to detail, look at design and colors, and ask more personal questions in a sales floor presentation, whether it's accurate or not.

The biggest conflict in beliefs revealed by the Catalyst research related to what is considered a key leadership behavior: problem-solving. Women said more women were better at problem-solving than men, but—guess what?—men said men were most superior in problem-solving. "But because men far outnumber women in top management positions, the male-held stereotype—that women are poor problem-solvers—dominates in current corporate thinking," Catalyst concluded.

...TO YOUR BOSS?

So if Hunnings said he's embarrassed he hasn't had more women staff members in his stores and Geralis noted she'd love to have one in every store, where are all the women? Not applying, it seems, although the group exercise instructor, health club and personal training worlds don't exactly want for women, and those jobs demand the same talents and strengths as sales staff, store managers or manufacturers' representatives. Even if some do filter in, they often filter back out again. Experts like Dugan from the University of Pittsburgh and Rikleen of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success said women have said that they often don't feel prejudice or pressure—until they have kids—and that can force them to leave or feel as if they should leave.

But that too will change. Rikleen for one said she has never tried to hide her family and family obligations from work—in fact, she had just picked up her teenage daughter mid-afternoon because of an appointment

MENTORING 101

HOW TO BE A GOOD MENTOR

BUILD FROM YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE

- » Think about what you wish you had known.
- » Think about who mentored you and what you learned.

SHARE WHAT YOU KNOW

- » Translate the unwritten rules; explain how information is transmitted.
- » Share your failures.

OPEN DOORS AND SET UP CONTACTS

- » Provide internal and external professional contacts for the mentee.
- » Arrange for the mentee to participate in high-visibility activities.

PROVIDE PERSPECTIVE

- » Help your mentee recognize his/her challenges—and to ride them out.
- » Be candid: Serve as a reality check when your mentee faces conflicts.

ENJOY THE BENEFITS OF BEING A MENTOR

- » Take advantage of a two-way source of advice and perspective.
- » Gain a sense of fulfillment from passing your wisdom to others.

KNOW THE LIMITS TO MENTORING

- » Respect confidentiality.
- » Don't feel you have to know all the answers.

From *Creating Successful Mentoring Programs*, by the women's research and education group, Catalyst (www.catalystwomen.org)

when she talked to GearTrends® and told us so. Would she have hidden that fact if the interviewer were a man? Absolutely not, she said. "People look to me as a role model and it's critical to say, 'You can do both,'" Rikleen said. "The workplace has to help you. ... I've always objected to the notion that it's taboo for a woman—or a man!—to separate from his or her family life as if it doesn't exist."




Physical Assets' Johanne Tummon

Being able to bring more women to an industry, including fitness, means women need to "experience it as a career option," Dugan said, and that means it's also important for the

industry's companies to educate, recruit, encourage, promote, start apprenticeships and mentor as best they can. "Once they have women in the organization, they are foolish not to look at her potential," she said. That mandate means that the women themselves must step up to the plate, which they admittedly have not done. Why? Too busy running the business to talk at a local college, go recruit at a club, or dig around in community circles for female applicants. And even too busy to think about collaborating among themselves industrywide to discuss and share needs, concerns or experiences. "Owners are just too busy running their business to collaborate," Geralis said, "and that seems to be true across the industry segments."

Maybe it's cockeyed optimism but everyone inside and outside the industry we spoke to said this deficit was sure to change, although some thought in a few years and some thought it may take up to another generation. "Maybe because it is a hardgoods-oriented business, it is not as attractive or intriguing to women, but since women make or influence such a high percentage of purchases, maybe that will start changing soon," said Logan. "This is a relatively new industry, so it may take fully another generation to really see the full integration of women."

After being asked, "Honey, can I speak to your boss?" the woman manager didn't hesitate a moment, showing the spunk and determination it takes to succeed in a male-dominated field and said: "Honey, ... I AM the boss." 

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