



Local Women Small Business Owners

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Photographs by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville

December 4, 2012 - Over the past year, the Long Beach Business Journal has featured a quarterly focus on women in business, highlighting small business owners in Long Beach and Signal Hill who either own their business outright or are co-owners with a business partner or spouse.

Each woman was asked the following question: What is your biggest challenge moving your business forward? Some of their responses were similar – the economy continues to be a difficulty for businesses across different sectors.

Other local women business owners found that challenge to be within themselves – fear, being one – and some endured the most strain on their business just working with the city through permitting and meeting standards and requirements from various departments.

Shari Blackwell

The Undershirt

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After nearly three decades in outside sales, Shari Blackwell sought the satisfaction of having her own business. In 2003, Blackwell made that dream a reality by purchasing The Undershirt.



The Undershirt is a 32-year-old business founded by two women in Belmont Shore. The company was more of a retail operation printer in the shore, and then moved to Signal Hill to get involved in business-to-business wholesale printing. Blackwell had worked in sales for steamship, metals, employment and other industries. About 10 years ago she looked at her husband, who was self-employed at the time, and was inspired to purchase and operate her own business.

“We started to look around to buy a small business,” Blackwell said. “I wasn’t specifically looking for this business, but [one of the owners], Joan, was getting ready to retire.” Blackwell bought the business and has since marketed it for the restaurant trade. Her focus is working with clients to develop a look for their restaurant, researching style and product that work well in whatever environment the venue offers.

In addition to restaurateurs, Blackwell works with plumbers, contractors, landscaping companies and more. The Undershirt also does logo embroidery and sells promotional items like blankets, tote bags, duffels and backpacks. Right now she is her only employee. “I’ve had some temporary help,” she said. “I have not hired an individual because it is so erratic. I have brought in someone on an as-needed basis.”

Blackwell is actively involved in the Signal Hill Chamber of Commerce as a current board-member and past president. She also serves on the Signal Hill Police Chief’s commission for determining awards, such as medals of valor and those for meritorious service.

The biggest challenge in moving her business forward is the lack of confidence in the economy, Blackwell said. “The economy is so erratic. It’s literally like a roller coaster. There’s no consistency. One month we’ll be doing well, then the next we’re down 50 percent. It’s tough to manage cash flow and inventory.” Blackwell does maintain a consistent client base, and during the recession years she has brought in continuous new business.

That business, however, has changed to smaller orders more frequently. Blackwell said this is not cost efficient for her clients nor is it for her business. “They are buying the bare minimum to outfit their employees, not taking advantage of price savings if they were to order in larger quantities,” she said. “So they end up paying more for an item and having less investment overall. They just want to put out the bare minimum to get the job done.”