

HOW-TO

# Be a woman in a male-dominated industry

BY CHRISTY WEBBER

**L**andscape Management asked me to write about my experience as a woman doing business in the landscaping industry. You know the drill: Write about how the industry held me back, how men treated me unfairly, how I never could catch a break and throw in a few of those big words I can hardly spell, such as bigotry, prejudice, chauvinism and sexism.

Gals (and anyone else who may be reading this), my story doesn't follow that pattern. Maybe I am too naive to recognize all of those terrible things. Or maybe I just don't care. I am not saying those terrible things don't exist or that I didn't experience discrimination as a woman. But I can tell you this: I never let it stand in my way.

I got started in this business in 1988. I was teaching high school in Chicago—and hated it. So, for extra money, I began mowing grass for friends and others who would hire me. My residential business grew, and in 1997 I hired a great landscape architect who helped me win a prestigious contract for a new arena—the United Center—during the Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan era. Go Bulls!

Today, 15 years after landing that contract, Christy Webber Landscapes employs 400 staff and has gross revenue of \$32 million. And we're still growing.

So, how did I do this as a woman in an industry completely dominated by men? In an industry so male that

when I signed up for trade shows, women in the industry had nowhere to meet but in rooms reserved for our male counterparts' wives? I did it by doing the same things successful men need to do—work hard, put in long hours, make smart hiring and banking moves and learn from your mistakes. I never allowed my being a woman to work against me.

## Make connections

Yes, there were comments such as, "Honey, how are you?" or people like the beast in the job trailer who treated everyone poorly, not just me. I never let it get me down or let my frustration show. Instead, I schemed



### QUICK TIP

**Do the same thing successful men do—work hard, put in long hours, make smart hiring and banking moves and learn from your mistakes. If you experience roadblocks, never let them get you down or let your frustration show.**

to figure out how to make men *want* to work with me. Sometimes that meant simply retreating and letting one of my male staffers handle the situation. But more likely it meant letting go of those things that could be considered discrimination and just doing a good job so they had to deal with me.

Many times I would bring a man with me to client meetings if I knew the client would feel more comfortable speaking “man speak.” Literally, some clients would look and talk only to the man on my staff—even though I owned the darn company! Did I care? Hell no. If I could get the business, the product or the answer, why should I care? I didn’t take it personally. I just listened, took notes—and took the work.

The fact is, most good men have a good woman in the mix. It’s their secretary, their wife or their daughter. Who writes the checks or answers the company phone? Usually a woman. Find her. I figured out early on how to connect with these women and make it work for my

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business. If you can connect on a basic human level and find something you have in common, you are in, no matter the race, creed or gender of the person you’re dealing with. Ladies, find that woman you can connect with.

Lastly, my secret weapon, and one that many of you don’t have, is I’m a lesbian. How does that help me? When someone finds out, there’s a curiosity and openness that breaks down the male-female barrier of business. Sure, there are lots of stupid questions and many stares (but not at my chest). Hey, if it works, work it!

Sometimes all the attention it attracts is embarrassing, but it’s a story. And who doesn’t like to do business with a company that does great work *and* has a good story?


Women: Find that niche, that story and that strength to rise above the noise. Business is business, and something is better than nothing. **LM**

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*Webber is president of Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago.*

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