

Women advise how to survive tough times

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Orange County has been slogging through tough times since the slowdown in home sales started in late 2005. Even two years after the recession officially ended, businesses, organizations and individuals have needed flexibility and creativity to survive and grow.

What better resource for creative ideas than the 18 women honored in the 16th Annual Remarkable Women Awards dinner this week by the National Association of Women Business Owners-Orange County? These women work at businesses and nonprofits that certainly have not escaped the financial difficulties yet are still here to guide their groups to growth as the economy slowly recovers.

I asked them how their entities handled tough times and what they advise for others.

NAWBO's Remarkable Women Lifetime Achievement honoree, Victoria Betancourte, said her staffing company, Coneybears in Santa Ana, lost 10 years' of retained earnings in the recession. Her most valuable lesson: "Don't run out of cash."

Mari Kurtz, NAWBO's Outstanding Innovator, said she moved her company, O.C. Metals Inc./Cal Pac Sheet Metal Inc. into commercial contracting when she saw the slowdown in 2007. She invested in new machinery and hardware so her companies could start making metal parts for the solar industry.

And Michelle Macis, NAWBO's Entrepreneur to Watch, survived a double hit, the recession and a burglary at her shop, Java Jean Bar in Anaheim Hills. She reinvented the business model, trying different chefs and foods to go with the fashion.

"In tough economic times, you have to reinvent yourself," Macis advised.

"We definitely had our ups and downs," said Brateil Aghasi, who was honored by Women Helping Women and Men2Work. "Three years ago we found ourselves in a position where we had less staff to do more work. The communities' need for more employment services put a strain on our infrastructure at the same time when I had to cut staff hours."

One change Aghasi made was to replace one-on-one appointments with workshops. The organization created WOW -- Workshop on Wheels -- that takes the workshops to agencies and job seekers around the county at hours convenient for them.

"So in two hours when we would have service five clients, we can now serve 30, all receiving WHW's signature high-quality service," she said.

Para Anderson, president of Mindoro Corp., which helps U.S. and Filipino companies that want to export, said she and her husband-partner had to make adjustments in their business model. They sold a flooring shop because they don't think the real estate market will rebound soon. They also moved Mindoro to a home office to reduce expenses.

She is also exploring other business opportunities in the Philippines, where the economy is growing.

"The theme I coined for my upcoming term as president of the Filipino-American Chamber is 'Think OC, Act Globally.' That's the advice I would give (other women business owners)," she said. "We live in a global economy and we have to start developing business relationships with people in areas with more robust economies."

NAWBO's member of the year, Christina Becker, a financial adviser at Merrill Lynch in Newport Beach, said she has increased her marketing efforts, focusing on methods that "give me the most bang for my buck. I stopped doing as many lunch meetings and opted for coffee meetings instead," she said. "It sounds trivial, but it really helped me to make my marketing dollars go further."

Several honorees work with nonprofits, whose donations have suffered in the poor economy.

"We have had to cut staff and utilize volunteers," said honoree Pearl Jemison-Smith, a founding board member of the AIDS Service Foundation. "Private sector fundraising has become more important than ever because of cuts in federal and state funds."

Goodwill of Orange County has also been hit with cutbacks, said honoree Joan Dornbach, vice president at the nonprofit. "First we developed a three-year business recovery plan with a primary objective to increase sustainable revenue and decrease expenses...We also began developing a new five-year strategic plan."

Among Goodwill's action items were to open five new stores and 11 new donation centers by 2012, temporarily cut salaries 10 percent for most employees and gradually restore the wages, temporarily discontinue employer contributions to retirement plans (reinstated in 2011) and suspend management incentive plan.

"Ensuring that the entire organization had an understanding of the steps necessary to weather the storm has made all the difference," Dornbach said.

But nonprofits weren't the only ones making cuts. Honoree Adriana Estrada said her employer, Volt Workforce Solutions, had a major consolidation and closed offices and downsized sales force and recruitment staff in 2009.

"I would advise women to stay active and get involved in the community, keeping professional skills up to date and current," she said.

Honoree Pamela Milliken, a self-employed event consultant, agreed that community involvement is a good way to promote an individual and her business. "It is so important to get your name out there whether you are self-employed or working for someone else," she advised.

Unisys eliminated management layers in response to the poor economy, said account executive Connie Vaughan, honored by the Executive Women's Golf Association. "From our CEO to our Help Desk, we are all focused on delivering information technology solutions that meet our clients' business needs and reduce their costs."

Her advice: take a long-term view, expand your network and learn new skills. As the economy recovers, you'll be viewed as an asset, "a doer not a complainer."

WISEPlace honored Kayleen Huffman, chief financial officer at Bassett Home Furnishing. "We partners of the company were the first to take salary cuts," Huffman said. "We have consolidated our warehouse and delivery logistics from five locations to two...There were minimal layoffs...We offer our customers value...We will not lose this focus as we move onward through the economic conditions we fact."

Honoree Lynn D. Salo said her employer, Allergan Inc., has always tried to avoid unnecessary spending. "We award employees who find ways to save on expenses with a 'Think Outside the Bucks' award," she said. "The best way to combat a lagging economy is to have diversity in your customer base...(and) continuing to deliver results."

Honoree Doris Farinacci, a CPA with Lesley, Thomas, Schwarz and Postma Inc., has worked with clients facing financial difficulties. Among her advice: "Make a realistic, detailed budget by month...Consider asking your landlord for concessions. Renegotiate your lease. Comparison shop for services...Do not live beyond your means. Small-business owners with excessive lifestyles end up draining their businesses of resources to finance their lifestyles and eventually lose on both ends."

2011 Remarkable Women honorees:

Here are the honorees, their company or agency, their professional organization:

- Victoria Betancourte, president Coneybeare, Santa Ana, Lifetime Achievement Award
- Mari Kurtz, president OC Metals Inc./ Cal Pac Sheet Metal Inc., Santa Ana, Outstanding Innovator Award
- Michelle Macis, founder Java Jean Bar, Anaheim Hills, Entrepreneur to Watch
- Brateil Aghasi, associate director Women Helping Women
- Para Anderson, president Mindoro Corp., Filipino American Chamber of Commerce of Orange County
- Christina Becker, financial advisor Merrill Lynch, NAWBO Orange County
- Gwendolyn Kuhns Black, Zonta Club of Newport Harbor

- Joan Dornbach, vice president Goodwill of Orange County
- Adriana Estrada, regional search manager Volt Workforce Solutions, American Society of Women Accountants-Orange Chapter
- Doris Farinacci, CPA at Lesley, Thomas, Schwarz and Postma Inc., Girl Scouts of Orange County
- Kayleen Huffman, CFO Bassett Home Furnishings, WISEPlace
- Pearl Jemison-Smith, founding board member, AIDS Service Foundation
- Pamela Milliken, self-employed event consultant, Business Alliance Orange County
- Teresa Quick, Thomas House Temporary Shelter
- Lynn D. Salo, vice president Allergan Inc., Girls Incorporated of Orange County
- Cynthia Teran, Fit 4R Kids
- Connie Vaughan, account executive Unisys Corp., Executive Women's Golf Assoc. Orange County chapter
- Rosi Zuloaga, National Assoc. Of Women in Construction

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