



Room at the Top, January 2008

It takes more than a great idea to create a million-dollar business. You need passion, luck and drive, as these highly successful women have learned. Here are their secrets.

By M.E. Reilly-McGreen

Martha Stewart. Bobbi Brown. Mrs. Fields. They're household names, and they represent a rapidly growing constituency in this country: successful, financially independent, entrepreneurial women.

Women own or control 41 percent of all privately held firms in the United States, and the number of female-owned businesses is growing at twice the national average. That translates to \$1.9 trillion dollars and 12.8 million jobs.

In Rhode Island, there are more than 36,000 privately held, female-controlled firms that employ 48,000-plus people and do \$7.8 billion in annual sales, according to the Washington D.C.-based Center for Women's Business Research.

But success in business is elusive. Only three percent of female-owned companies generate revenues of more than \$1 million, and most new enterprises close within five years.

These Rhode Island women, however, created businesses that either nudge that magic \$1 million mark or far exceed it. Several attended all-girls' schools. Four have advanced degrees. Two have distinguished themselves in athletics. One is a member of a world championship softball team. One is a former beauty queen. One advised a U.S. president. One designs for the Hollywood elite. Another owns one million square feet of commercial Rhode Island real estate. Their paths to success are varied, but they all share a passion for what they do and a commitment to seeing future generations of women succeed.

The Visionary
Pattie Garrahy-Robertson PGR Media

The Taste Maker
Leslie Montie Wildtree

The Communicator
Christine Heenan Clarendon Group

The Arbiter
Renee Evangelista Edwards Angell
Palmer and Dodge

The Trend Setter
Carolyn Rafaelian Alex and Ani

The Competitor
Ann-Marie Harrington Embolden
Design

The Visionary



Pattie Garrahy-Robertson // Company: PGR Media // **Offices:** Providence, Boston and New York // **Cause:** Count Me In // **Best Money Spent in Business:** Over-investing in technology. From the beginning we set up employees with home offices that tied them into a database in the office. This way we could allow for life's inevitable curve balls of sick children, daycare blips and commuting problems. // **Toughest Business Decision:** Knowing when to step back and allow others to make decisions with regard to client management and hiring. Five years ago I hired a president, and a consultant advised me to give her space, to bring her own spirit and experience to the agency. Now that I have, I have learned that we complement one another, as our skill sets are very different. Stepping back has allowed me to focus more on my strengths and to spend more time with my daughters when they least want me to—during the teenage years! // **Other:** Miss Rhode Island 1974.

When the editors of the New York Daily News wanted feedback on the success of the Gap's Keep It Simple campaign—the one with Audrey Hepburn dancing to AC/DC's "Back in Black"—they sought out Pattie Garrahy-Robertson. When Katie Couric debuted on "CBS Evening News," media analysts asked Garrahy-Robertson for her opinion then, too. When Media Week wondered whether People should worry about competition from

US in the celebrity-weekly market, guess who got the call?

Pattie Garrahy-Robertson, fifty-three, is the founder and CEO of PGR Media, a full-service marketing and strategic planning agency that helps brand-name clients find the best media venues for their products. Garrahy's clients are A-listers: Tommy Hilfiger, RedEnvelope, Keds, Stride Rite, K-Swiss, Ian Schrager Company, Saucony and Tom's of Maine, among others. PGR Media has been twice recognized as an Inc. 500 company and has grossed more than \$100 million in media billings.

For Garrahy-Robertson, the choice to be in business came at a time of great personal change. In 1986, at the age of thirty-one, she was the advertising director at Faberge and pregnant with her first daughter. By the time Laura was born, Garrahy-Robertson wanted a job that more suited her role as a mother. She returned to the company but not as an employee. She was PGR Media, consultant to Faberge.

To women who would work for themselves, Garrahy-Robertson says: Embrace ambition. Seek success. And face fear.

"There's fear at every level. They think their husband won't like it if they're more successful than them. We buy into the rhetoric that ambition is bad for women. We shouldn't," Garrahy-Robertson says.

And support your sisters. "Women do a lot of comparing themselves to one another," Garrahy-Robertson says. "It's time for women to support other women's choices. It is something we have to get a lot better at."

Clients pay Garrahy-Robertson for her knowledge, and her ability to understand the cultural zeitgeist. She believes in intuition and exhorts women to trust their instincts, and to know their worth.

Case in point: She was at a Friday meeting some years ago with Tommy Hilfiger in his New York office. Mid-meeting she told Hilfiger she had to leave because snow was starting to fall, and her daughters, Laura and Sarah, were competing in a championship swim meet.

"The prospect of getting to the meet was looking dismal until I had the conversation with Tommy and he said, 'Of course.' "

Garrahy-Robertson says. "Important here is the fact that we had worked very hard for many years to help Tommy Hilfiger build its business."

Hilfiger had his driver drive Garrahy-Robertson to Connecticut to catch her train.

"Women need to get better at saying what we need," she says. "If you state what you need, you might be surprised at what you receive."

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Taste Maker



Leslie Montie // Company: Wildtree // **Offices:** Warwick // **Employees:** 32 “plus a couple of thousand reps” // **Motto:** There are two kinds of people in the world: those who find an excuse and those who find a way. // **Toughest Business Decision:** Taking on business partners. I knew it was the right thing to do for the company and for our independent representatives at the time, and it has turned out beautifully for everyone involved, but it was a really hard decision to make. It’s hard to ask for help. // **Best Money Spent in Business:**

Incentive trips for sales representatives.

There’s big money in food. Billionaire Warren Buffett believes it. In 2002, industry insiders estimated that his company, Berkshire Hathaway, bought the Pampered Chef for \$800 million.

Leslie Montie, forty-one, founder of Wildtree, knows it, too. In ten years, she’s parlayed home-based herb parties into a multi-million-dollar direct sales business.

Montie’s is a story of blessing born of near tragedy. As a child, her eldest son, Justin, was stricken with Kawasaki Disease, an autoimmune disease. It left his immune system compromised and susceptible to food allergies. Processed foods were a danger. Montie was raised in what she calls an all-natural home, and she turned to her family for help.

“Holidays, for instance, our stockings had fruit in them,” she says. “And while the rest of the neighborhood hunted for chocolate eggs, we were hunting for peanuts with the shells still on them. There was never ever any soda, sugary cereals, white bread or white pasta. Our peanut butter came in eight-ounce deli containers from the health food store. My mother made bran muffins. I fed them to the dog.

“That dog lived for a very long time.”

Turns out a Twinkie-free childhood was the training Montie needed to create a line of herbal products for her son. Friends encouraged her to sell them—originally thirty items—at school fairs. She quickly began selling out at these events. Invitations to do home parties followed. Within three months of opening her business, Montie hired her first independent rep. Continued success there led her to direct selling, and together with a phalanx of stay-at-home moms seeking part-time work, she built Wildtree into a thriving business. She now has 200 items in her product line. In 2004, Montie partnered with the Southwestern Company, the oldest direct-selling company in the country. Wildtree products are now sold nationwide by a largely female workforce numbering in the thousands.

Women are naturals in this business, Montie says.

“We’re generous with our love, our time, our energy,” she says. “It’s connection. We get

that. That's what we do. Everything's community for us."

One of the biggest issues bedeviling entrepreneurs is work-life balance. A small business can be all-consuming.

"I have not managed to separate my work from the rest of my life," Montie says. "It's not work. It's just joy.

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Communicator



Christine Heenan // Company: Clarendon Group // **Offices:** Providence // **Employees:** 9 // **References:** Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Al and Tipper Gore. // **Moonlighting Gig:** Adjunct Assistant Professor at Brown University in the graduate public policy program. // **Best Money Spent in Business:** Clarendon Group's incorporation fee. // **Toughest Business Decision:** I think the decision to stay small and regional has at times been very difficult, because we're an ambitious group with experience outside Rhode Island, and have clients outside Rhode Island. But for a whole host of reasons, it has made personal and professional sense to stay anchored here and stay roughly the size we are now.

In her twenties, White House Domestic Policy Council senior policy analyst Christine Heenan wrote speeches for Bill and Hillary Clinton and the Gores. By thirty, she was director of community and government relations at Brown University. At forty, she is the founder and president of the Clarendon Group, a six-year-old public affairs firm specializing in marketing, public policy and public and government relations. Clarendon is one of only two women-owned firms in the state to rank among the top fifteen PR/advertising companies in the Providence Business News' 2007 Book of Lists, with gross revenues just north of the million-dollar mark. Clients include Lifespan, The Rhode Island Foundation, the state Department of Health, the American Cancer Society and the Rhode Island Medical Society.

Another coup: The Clarendon Group received the 2006 Alfred P. Sloan Award for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. The national award, part of the When Work Works project and led by the Families and Work Institute in New York City, recognizes companies demonstrating the best flexible workplace practices and policies as part of an overall business strategy rather than an employee accommodation.

Flexibility, time and balance are big buzzwords in the Clarendon culture.

"I'm constantly conscious of optimizing time," Heenan says. "It's there. Doctors and

lawyers may spend two days a week on a golf course. I'm happy to give that up. Right now, my priorities are otherwise."

Her priorities are two sons, ages eight and eleven. Heenan started her firm to spend more time at home with them, and it's not just loose talk. She is planning a trip around the world with them that will include six months' of homeschooling.

Balance is a priority item for working moms. A recent study by the Pew Research Center, "Fewer Mothers Prefer Full-Time Work," says of more than 2,000 women surveyed, 60 percent working full-time yearn for part-time employment. Seven of Heenan's nine employees are full-time, but only four put in the usual forty-hour, in-house week.

Heenan hired people who share her priorities, for example that getting to a Little League baseball game or a ballet recital are as important as a client meeting.

"There is a natural level of productivity to any work day," Heenan says. "We take fewer long lunches. We find ways to always make ourselves available to our clients, and our clients measure us by results rather than time in the seat."

What accomplishment might mark her fiftieth year? Heenan, who serves on the national board of the Coalition of Essential Schools, would like to run an inner-city charter school.

"I've always enjoyed advising schools and educators on communication, but it's always been on the outside," she says. "I'd love to be directly involved in the motivating and educating of kids."

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Arbiter



Renee Evangelista // Company: Edwards Angell Palmer and Dodge, Providence // **Position:** Capital Partner and Co-Managing Partner, Rhode Island offices // **Best Money Spent in Business:** Marketing money. Taking a terrific client to play tennis with Chris Evert and Billie Jean King. // **Toughest Business Decision:** A few years ago I was contacted by a potential new client to represent him, and he had a significant estate. However, he had had several estate lawyers before me, and it was apparent it would not be an enjoyable representation. So after consultation with my partner Max Kohlenberg, I decided not to go forward. I believe it was the correct decision, but it was not easy! // **Other:** Third baseman for the 1979 Little League World Series Champions, the North Providence West Little League Girls' Softball Team.

Renee Evangelista, forty, supervises ninety lawyers and 125 staff in addition to running her own practice within the firm of Edwards Angell Palmer and Dodge. Her area of expertise is trusts and estates. She worked on the Doris Duke estate case after the original

Million Dollar Baby, as she was known, died in 1993, leaving her estate in the care of her butler. Evangelista also worked on settling the estate of Camilla Lyman, the transgendered Hopkinton multi-millionaire who disappeared in 1987 and whose body was found ten years later in a septic tank on her property.

Evangelista manages a book of business valued at more than ten figures. She is also a trustee of several multi-million-dollar trusts.

“I can tell you that to make it at a large law firm you have to think like a businessperson because the legal profession, at this level, is a multi-billion-dollar business. I made partner here at the firm in my seventh year,” Evangelista says. “To make partner, you have to generate business as well as work well with the other partners and do good work. Business generation is critical in any law firm.”

Evangelista attributes her success to a support system at home, a single-sex education, childhood team sports, a good work environment and parents who encouraged her.

“My father died young,” Evangelista says. “He wanted my sister and me to grow up to be independent women.”

He sent his daughters to a single-sex, parochial high school and encouraged Evangelista in her youth softball career. At twelve, she and fourteen other North Providence girls took the World Series Championship from a Florida team with a score of five to two. Both experiences had an effect on Evangelista. “They teach you how to be independent. You can be aggressive. You can be yourself,” she says.

It’s impossible, of course, to quantify the effect of those experiences, but it is also impossible to discount them. What’s clear is how Evangelista is comfortable in an arena that few women enter.

“Only 17 percent of the partners in corporate law firms in the U.S. are women,” Evangelista says. “The number one reason women leave is family issues. That tells you just how hard it is for women to be a partner in your average corporate firm. That is not my experience; my firm has been very supportive. Young women need to know that you can be successful in a career that’s very satisfying but know that it’s not easy,” she adds.

Evangelista and her husband have three young boys. What free time she has is spent with them. When you’re running your own business, she says, “you could do your job twenty-four-seven. There’s always a meeting.”

There should be guidance, though, she says. “I think women need to talk about this in med school, law school, business school,” she says. “There should be a class on work/life balance, work and family issues for both men and women.”

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Trend Setter



Carolyn Rafaelian // Company: Alex and Ani // **Offices:** Cranston and New York City, New York // **Career High:** Working with Paul McCartney. **Best Money Spent in Business:** The cost of opening my TriBeCa showroom in New York and the money invested in obtaining the patents for our expandable bangles and necklaces, which is the signature concept of the collection. // **Toughest Business Decision:** Having to let go of one of my major accounts at the beginning of my company's growth spurt. They were doing unethical things. It was a nightmare. They weren't up to par with the standards of my brand. That was definitely the hardest decision. // **Best Advice:** Go with your gut. Always. // **Childhood Ambition:** To be a designer, a wealthy woman and a famous roller skater.

Carolyn Rafaelian, forty-one, is the owner of Alex and Ani, a decade-old, multimillion dollar jewelry business whose corporate clients include many of the world's finest retailers: Fred Segal, Henri Bendel, Neiman Marcus, Anthropologie, Bloomingdale's and Saks Fifth Avenue. Her private client list is a Who's Who of Hollywood: Oprah Winfrey, Courteney Cox and Renee Zellweger. International fashion magazines including Women's Wear Daily, Vogue and In Style consult Rafaelian on market trends.

The irony is Rafaelian eschews trends. "I developed my collection around what I believed in and not what the department stores necessarily understood and still created a following and molded a brand without following the current trends," she says.

What Rafaelian believes in is using recycled metals and manufacturing her products in America. Her belief in activism spurred her to create Project USA, a nonprofit, which has raised funds for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, survivors of breast cancer, and endangered species. Most recently Rafaelian teamed up with Paul McCartney in fundraising for the Humane Society of the United States' ProtectSeals campaign. Rafaelian is now working with Sheryl Crow in an attempt to save wild mustangs. "Giving back is extremely important because the vision and the vibe of the company are based on character and empowerment," Rafaelian says. "To be able to create a new model of doing business and staying true to your vision is setting a new standard in the business and fashion world."

Rafaelian believes her success is intrinsically tied to her spirituality. Raised Armenian Apostolic Christian, Rafaelian says her religious upbringing has evolved into a deep respect for all faiths. Her Spiritual Armor Collection incorporates in its designs ancient religious symbols. Saks couldn't keep it in the stores at Christmas.

What about the idea that spirituality itself is just the trend du jour? It wouldn't be the first time corporate types saw a buck to be made in appearing socially conscious. Last May, Vanity Fair's second annual green issue reported that the number of environmentally conscious clothing designers has risen from ten to more than 500 in the last five years.

"I create for myself first," Rafaelian says. "It just so happens that other people like it. The

best thing about being an entrepreneur is the freedom to make decisions, and my choices are based on my beliefs and vision.

“You don’t need to spend a lot of money and you don’t need a lot of people to make things happen,” she adds. “I’m creating out of passion. That’s contagious.”

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Competitor



Ann-Marie Harrington // Company: Embolden Design, Pawtucket // **Employees:** 13 // **Best Advice:** Go with your gut. // **Awards:** 2006 Alfred P. Sloan Award for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. // **Best Money Spent in Business:** Providing 100 percent of the cost of health and dental insurance for the staff. // **Toughest Business Decision:** Hiring my first employee. It seemed like such a big decision and a huge responsibility. It turned out to be a great decision. My

first employee is still with me. At the time, though, it was a lot like jumping off a cliff and hoping my parachute opened. // **Other:** Scored more than 1,000 points in her high school basketball career.

Ann-Marie Harrington, forty-three, was a social worker at Rhode Island Kids Count in 1994 when she had the idea to create a web page for the nonprofit. Harrington saw the Internet as a means of getting a message out in a cost-effective way. In the three months it took to complete the site, Harrington developed the idea for a business that nine years later would be creating websites for some of New England’s biggest businesses, community foundations and nonprofits.

“I wanted to fill a hole I saw for nonprofits looking for superior websites at a fair price,” Harrington says. “I became a social worker because I have always had a passion for justice and fairness. I wanted to build a business that could reflect these values on all levels.”

Embolden claims more than 100 clients, including Bank Rhode Island, MetLife, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, The Rhode Island Foundation, Mystic Aquarium, and Brown and Yale universities, and last year it passed the million-dollar mark in revenues.

Harrington, who attended Bryant University on a basketball scholarship, talks about her management style in sports vernacular.

“When you talk about managing people, it’s not about me being the boss of them,” she says.

“I can be a coach and I can have my team. On a team you learn how to win, how to lose, how to work hard. You learn how to lead and to motivate others. You learn a lot about being fair.”

Harrington’s decision-making process is equal parts education and intuition. She is diligent about keeping on top of market trends, but she’s attuned to that internal barometer, too.

“I have a good gut. It rarely fails me,” she says. “A firm set of business beliefs and principles guide my business decisions. Education, longevity and experience are invaluable. But my most valuable personal asset is my intuition. My instincts play a major role in almost every decision I make.”

Privately held companies like Embolden are not required to disclose information about salaries or profits to the public or to their own employees. Harrington does, though.

“We have a consensus decision-making process here at Embolden,” Harrington continues.

“All employees see budgets. All know revenues. Everyone here really knows what’s going on.”

Harrington believes in sharing credit with her staff, too.

“To me, business is really about people. We build really great web applications because we have people who are really good at what they do,” the business wo-man continues.

“I couldn’t do all this myself.”

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Builder and Shaker



Jennifer Cookke // Companies: Blackstone Management, F.H. French Company // **Employees:** 15 // **Owns:** One million square feet of commercial property in Rhode Island. // **Toughest Business Decision:** Firing people. // **Best Money Spent in Business:** Spending money on salaries. // **Best Advice:** Go for it. There's nothing like the feeling of making your own destiny. // **Childhood Ambition:** To be a world traveler.

Must it be motherhood or career? Absolutely not, mother and entrepreneur Jennifer Cookke says. She advocates, though, that women not forget themselves, what they want both personally and professionally, when making major life choices.

“I don't want anyone to think it's easy,” Cookke, forty-one, says of entrepreneurship. She owns and runs the third largest property development firm in the state.

“But avoid opting out. If women keep opting out,” she argues, “then how do we get into the position where we have a voice?”

Cookke taught “Women in Business” at Bryant University last fall. The class, an elective, was full.

“You create your own opportunities. I believe in this so strongly,” she says. “I want younger women to think of a revised you-can-do-it-all philosophy.”

Cookke says she is driven by a need to prove herself that has dogged her most of her life and has required real sacrifice. When she started school at American University in the mid-1980s, she also began working for the Sheraton Corporation. She so impressed people there that they offered her a job before she'd completed college, but it meant moving to Boston. She went. She spent ten years in corporate America and acquired a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees from MIT in that time. By thirty-four, she was married, pregnant and the owner of Blackstone Management, a property management company, when her father announced he intended to sell F. H. French Company, another property development company. She bought it. Not inherited, she points out. Cookke paid fair market value in 2001.

Along with her two children, Cookke says her company's success—her properties have an unheard of 98.7 percent occupancy rate—is her greatest coup to date.

“Taking a family business and making it successful, reinventing it to fit the times is most satisfying,” Cookke says.

Not that the process has been seamless. Construction is a testosterone-dominated profession. Placing her imprimatur on an established business, creating a corporate culture of her own, required more of Cookke than knowing each tenant on a first-name basis, though she does. It also meant tough decisions. One of Cookke's first acts as president was to let go of most of the company's employees, some of whom had watched her grow up. "Most of them really didn't buy into me," Cookke says.

"It was done well on both sides. It wasn't a bad situation, just a hard situation."

Done, by the way, while nursing her newborn behind her office doors.

"When you own a small business, there is no such thing as maternity leave or taking a month off to go to Europe," Cookke says. "When something's that much a part of you and you're good at it, you don't take sick days. There's no time."

"You cannot be a successful entrepreneur unless you're passionate," she adds. "Because of the amount of effort, and the things you are going to sacrifice have to warrant that passion."

Cookke's is a lean company—fifteen employees in total. For success in business, she says, invest in people.

"Hire the very best people," she says. To me, this means finding people with a work ethic and passion that I share, regardless of the work experience they have. I pay my people well and reward them with perks that in the long run cost me little compared to what they contribute to my business.

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor

The Deal Maker



Chris Tanner // Company: RE/MAX Flagship, Narragansett // **Bragging Rights:** We've had the number one market share in South County since 1996. // **Employees:** 39 // **On the Company's Worth:** My office sales' volume for the last three years, plus the first nine months of this year, is in excess of \$580,000,000. // **Best Money Spent in Business:** It was way back in 1983. I only had \$3,000 in a savings account, and that was the money that I used to open Keenan Realtors. // **Toughest Business Decision:** It came about four years ago when I decided to, once again, be the sole owner of the office. I had a business partner for seven years and was comfortable having help in managing. But it was the best decision I ever made. // **Motto:** I don't take advantage of women-owned business opportunities. If I can't compete in the big group then I'm not going to compete at all.

In the mid '70s, Chris Keenan Tanner was an elementary school teacher at a parochial school in Wakefield. She was happy. She had undergraduate and graduate degrees in education. Then in April of 1979, she received a letter from the Diocese of Providence telling her that in 2014 she'd be eligible to receive a pension of \$660 a month.

"That was my first midlife crisis," Tanner says and laughs. "I was thirty."

She left education and went into real estate, making nearly \$10,000 in her first year. By 1983 Tanner had opened Keenan Realtors, landed Gilbane Construction as a client and sold forty-two condos in forty-five days. In 1990, Tanner bought her RE/MAX franchise, and in 1996 she partnered with another local realtor to create RE/MAX Flagship, the biggest firm in South County. She bought her partner out in 2004.

Tanner still sees herself as an educator and a student. Her success is predicated on her people as much, if not more, than market trends.

"My company's assets are my agents," she says. "At the end of the day, every day, all of our assets walk out of the door. My main job is to make sure that the agents are happy enough to walk back in the next day. I never forget that. So my job is to train, coach and mentor agents so that they become the best that they can. I love to see other people succeed. My other job is to recruit new people to the office. This is a little more challenging for me, but over the last several years I have been able to maintain an agent count of plus or minus forty."

And people are not the same.

"We're looking at four generations: the traditionalists, the Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and the Millennials," she says. "My generation needs to understand how yours thinks because

we don't think like you think.”

“The bad part of entrepreneurship is that the job is never done,” Tanner says. “There’s always one more project I could work on. Maintaining a personal life is tough.”

Just surviving in real estate sales is an accomplishment. Tanner estimates that one in ten realtors makes it; she attributes her success to integrity.

“I rely upon my reputation in the business. People know this about me,” she says. “You hear the truth from me.”

Most RE/MAX owners in Rhode Island are men. Tanner’s achievements—she was also the 1993 president of the Rhode Island Association of Realtors—prompted a council of female realtors to invite her to join their association. She refused, saying that such associations make her feel marginalized.

“I am not a minority,” she explains. “My parents always drilled into my head that the girls in the family must go to college because one day we might have to support ourselves. ‘Men could do anything; men could dig ditches,’ my father said, but women needed to support themselves.”

Listening, Martha

-Photography by Patrick O'Connor