



Using Intuition in Business

--by Aliza Pilar Sherman

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We've all heard references to "a woman's intuition," but how does that intuition serve women in business? Learning to not only trust one's intuition but to also tap into it can prove valuable, according to several entrepreneurs and experts.

Betsy Wiersma started Wiersma Experience Marketing in 1986 and more recently had real success by listening to her intuition.

Wiersma had created a luxury retreat for executive women called CampExperience. In the process of gathering sponsors who were interested in her 200 executive "campers," she targeted a local business magazine Colorado Company.

After three months of follow-up calls, she had an in-person meeting with the CEO with a proposal in hand. Suddenly, she was stopped in her tracks by her inner voice.

"Take the CONTRACT," Wiersma's inner voice said to her. She was taking only a proposal but felt a powerful message to take the contract instead. "I quickly made the proposal an agreement and off I went. Long story short, when I saw the CEO she said 'Sorry it was hard to connect, I like your good works...where do I sign!'"

All Wiersma had to do now was to pull out the contract and did the deal on the spot.

Laurie Hurley owns two businesses in Newbury Park, California - Bright Apple Tutoring Service, Inc. and Home Tutoring Business. She says she counts on her intuition daily to help make business decisions. Once in a while, her 'gut feeling' tells her something is wrong, but she admits she had not always listened to it.

One of the businesses Hurley owns is a tutor referral service - Bright Apple Tutoring. She matched tutors with students in need of one-on-one tutoring in their home and has a network of about 75 tutors in the Southern California area.

Hurley interviews every tutor before they are placed on her active tutor list.

Recalls Hurley, "I had an appointment with a middle-aged woman who had wonderful experience. Her resume was terrific and so were her references. She arrived at my home office for her interview looking quite disheveled. Her eyes were red and it looked like she had been crying. I asked her if she was OK and she said her husband had recently passed away, and she was having a tough morning."

As the two women talked, Hurley thought she detected alcohol on her breath at 10:00 in the morning. Thinking it was just her imagination, she carried on with the interview. The woman was speaking clearly and had all the right answers to my questions, but a nagging feeling told me something was "off". When the interview was over, the woman apologized for being upset when she arrived and said she looked forward to tutoring some students.

The next thing Hurley did was to call all of the woman's references, did a background and criminal check and everything checked out fine. Still, she could not shake the weird feeling she had about the applicant.

"She was able to tutor upper level math and science, which I desperately needed. Two days later I called her and offered her a first student."

The day of her first session, the mother of the student called Hurley and said the tutor was late. Hurley tried unsuccessfully to reach the tutor on her cell phone. At 5:30 the mother called again and told her the tutor just arrived - drunk.

Says Hurley, "I apologized profusely and could have kicked myself for not listening to my inner voice which rarely leads me astray. That was the last time I ever contracted with a tutor that I had even a bit of a doubt about. There is

something to be said for women's intuition - it's usually right on!"

Lynn Robinson is the author of five books on intuition including the upcoming "Trust Your Gut: How the Power of Intuition Can Grow Your Business" (Kaplan, October 2006). She also owns Intuitive Consulting, Inc. offering managers and executives insights into their goals, decisions and strategies and training in the use of intuition.

Her business actually got a boost as the result of an intuitive moment at a funeral. She walked into a room where a memorial service was being held for a friend who had died. Robinson recounts what happened next.

"I heard what I can only describe as an inner voice telling me to 'sit there.' My attention was drawn to an empty chair next to a woman I didn't know. Being a big believer in intuition I sat where directed. At the end of the service the woman and I were engaging in small talk. I mentioned my work training executives to use their intuition. It turns out she was a reporter for the Boston Globe. She wrote an article about my business that created about 300 new clients over the next several months. I was glad I trusted that inner voice."

Unfortunately, intuition is not usually encouraged in the business world, says Robinson. Business culture is based on fact, logic and research. "It's tough to speak up in a meeting with a sentence that begins, 'I feel...' Your idea will be shot down in a hurry."

Many women have told Robinson that they've learned to choose different language to describe their intuitive insights. "My gut tells me..." "My instincts say..." "My hunch is..." are more apt to allow your inner knowing to be heard in a business environment.

Ruth Furman is president of ImageWords Publicity & Writing in Las Vegas, Nevada. She trusted her intuition after a meeting with a potential new client. She felt that the person was "shady," and opted not to take them on as a client. Someone she knows did and is still trying to collect payment for services.

What gave her a sense that the potential client was not trustworthy? Her first clue was that the individual was hesitant to commit to payment terms and scope of services beyond the standard negotiation. Furman described this individual as "too slick."

"I sensed clearly that it would be difficult to manage expectations going forward," says Furman.

The signs that Furman usually takes as intuition are rarely strong and clear, and she admits that she can be "easily seduced by dollar signs that try to impede my judgment."

Saying no to the "shady" client was difficult but quick although Furman struggled over how to communicate her decision.

Says Furman, "I've been guilty of giving too much information and 'over-explaining' my rationale. These days I am more forthright and honest than I've ever been in the past. Still, I avoid burning bridges at all costs. People in my industry are very well connected and my business growth is based on referrals."

Judi Henderson-Townsend, owner of MannequinMadness.com, would not have a business if she had not listened to her intuition.

Five years ago, she was looking at an online classified list for concert tickets and noticed someone was selling a mannequin. She decided to buy one for a garden art project.

"When I met the seller, I discovered he had 50 mannequins to sell. He ran the only mannequin rental business in town and was leaving the state so he was liquidating his inventory. He casually mentioned that now there would not be a place to rent a mannequin in the Bay Area."

Although she had never even touched a mannequin before, had no experience working retail and did not have any idea why customers would rent a mannequin, something in her gut said that San Francisco was too creative a city not to have a mannequin rental place.

With little time to do market research and without access to the vendor's business records or customer data, Henderson-Townsend followed intuition and bought the man's entire inventory, converting the basement of her home into Mannequin Madness. She ran with business part-time while working at a dot-com company.

Six months after she started the business, her inventory increased to 500 mannequins, and she started selling as well as renting them but the business remained a part-time venture for her. When the dot-com company she was working for failed, she decided to be a full time mannequin vendor and has experienced much success.

Jennifer Stephano, founder, owner and CEO of Border Billboards in Las Vegas, readily admits, "When I slip up and don't listen to my gut, I pay for it."

Several years ago, she did business with a man who turned out to be highly unethical. Looking back, Stephano realizes that she ignored the nagging message her gut was trying to communicate to her. The business relationship ended up costing her frustration and anxiety as well as money since it resulted in a costly lawsuit. She eventually won the lawsuit, but believes that if she had paid attention to her intuition, she could have saved herself a lot of

headache and sleepless nights.

Says Stephano, "Intuition insulates me from business mistakes. It protects me from making a decision I'll regret later. It is always there, telling me to stop and listen and evaluate my risks. For me, intuition is that 'gut read' that signals whether or not I should move forward."

For Sherry Amanpour, listening to her gut led to a business shift. As founder of a search firm and career counseling practice, Aman Consultant in New York, she noticed a decline in closing deals even though she was getting many search assignments.

"My intuition told me this phenomenon was more than just the cyclical nature of work entrepreneurs face," explains Amanpour. "Feeling confused, depressed and anxious I couldn't understand why efforts and tactics that had worked so well in the past were now failing. It seemed I had never worked so hard for close to negligible results."

Finally, on a Saturday morning as Amanpour walked through Central Park, she had what she calls an 'epiphany' moment.

"I thought about changing directions and going from search to 'career transitioning' since it seemed everybody I spoke with was unhappy at work. I was so excited about this new path. At the same time and during the same walk the thought, 'to everything there is a season', crossed my mind. I wondered if that was the reason the searches had failed - to put me in a new direction."

Amanpour has not looked back since those thoughts and is now engaged in a rewarding career transitioning practice.

Elaine Osgood, president of Atlas Travel International in Milford, MA believes that her intuition was key to the start and success of her business.

Without knowing anything about the travel business or business in general, Osgood's intuition told her starting a business was the right thing to do. By trusting her intuition when she made that move, she began to use it more and more every day on the job.

Says Osgood, "My intuition comes into play almost every day on the job. From hiring, to building relationships with clients, deciding which technology to invest in, to deciding where to relocate my current stores. the list just goes on and on."

Stacey Demarco, author of "Witch in the Boardroom" (Llewellyn Worldwide, Ltd) believes that intuition is a number of things dependant upon how an individual filters the world.

"If you are someone who is connected spiritually, you may view intuition as those helping signals from the Divine. If you don't go in for that kind of thing, intuition may be an inner knowingness of yourself which signals you in a useful way in order to get you closer to what you want."

Personally, Demarco believes that the more connected she is, the better she can make decisions, perform tasks, and create.

Demarco feels that women tend to ignore their intuition because they can't tell the difference between "what is the brilliant, shining, inner knowingness of true intuition and what are those voices in our head that normally belong to someone else who limits us."

Demarco calls the latter voices "The Committee" and explains "The Committee is made up of various ill-fitting beliefs that we have been exposed to and believed by integrating this into our minds. Committee members may include teachers, parents, a childhood friend - anyone who has put forward a judgment or beliefs about you that may not be true, but you have bought into anyway. You are not your committee. You are where your intuition lives! I believe its only when we begin to actively trust ourselves, our unconscious and those 'feelings' that we get confident that intuition is a real life tool."

In terms of tips on how to tap into intuition, Demarco has this to say:

1. Know thyself! Take the time every day to check in with yourself - shut your eyes, breathe deeply and be centered for a few minutes - and during this quiet time, ask your unconscious mind (or the Divine) to make the signals of intuition stronger for you when necessary so that you will more easily be able to recognize it when it comes.
2. Develop an awareness of where, what and how the intuition hits or what it feels like. This way you can recognize your intuition with confidence and act accordingly. "For example, if I am feeling 'uneasy' about meeting someone for the first time, I have learnt I have two distinct feelings flagging this in my physical body. I feel a pressure in my throat, and my breathing slows. I have become aware that this is a real feeling/warning and I need to investigate more before I take any business dealings further with this person. I have learnt over time that I am pretty accurate with these feelings."
3. Keep a record to make it real. If you are anything like me, you like to be rational and have proof that this intuition stuff actually works and can be trusted. Demarco keeps her own book and refers to it frequently. "I can now look back and see the time that I really drawn to going to the art gallery just as I passed through that part of town and

when I did go, I met a person who ended up as one of my biggest clients. By keeping some kind of a record, you have the evidence to build intuitive confidence."

Author and consultant Robinson suggests that you "Ask your intuition questions. Ask open-ended questions like, "How can I..." or "What can be done to...?" By doing this you're allowing answers that will add insight and lead you to success. Keep an intuition notebook and write any and all answers that pop into your mind. Don't censor or judge the responses until you've completed the exercise.

Judith E. Glaser is CEO of Benchmark Communications, Inc. and author of "The DNA of Leadership" (Platinum Press, March, 2006). Her advice for accessing intuition includes:

1. Move from doubt to trust. This often "takes an initial leap of faith," but one that will soon bring you the bridges you need to move from doubt to trust. Move with your intuition. Follow it, cultivate it, honor it.... Then reward yourself when listen and are right.
2. Travel. Talk to people on planes & trains. Says Glaser, "I travel quite a bit and started really practicing synchronicity through my travels. When I travel, I always strike up a conversation with people next to me. I tune in by just looking at them, relaxing my body, and asking my self if this person is someone I need to know? I must mention that sometimes I get no response back, and then I ask again and wait to see if the urge arrives. If not, I don't talk. What amazes me is when conversations unfold, how much we have in common, or how important the person turns out to be. I found my husband's surgeon and now business partner by talking with a woman on a plane coming back from Chicago."

Says Glaser, "Women should speak up about their intuitive insights rather than holding them in. Over time, their voices will be heard when the truth comes out."

Experts agree that practicing being open to your inner insights helps you build the skill of being more intuitive in business and in life.

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