

FOOD INDUSTRY

WOMEN

TO WATCH IN THE '90s

*It's not just a
boy's club anymore.*

BY MARY ELLEN KUHN



Just a couple of decades past the time when women were a rare sight in the male-dominated food industry, how far have women come?

A long way, certainly. Women executives are no longer quite as rare. Kellogg Co. estimates that a fifth of its management staff is female, and at General Mills, 39 percent of professional employees and 24 percent of managers are women. In addition, women are moving beyond jobs in consumer affairs and public relations—areas traditionally reserved for them—into sales, marketing, finance and law.

So far, though, few women have made it to the top. Think food company CEO, and chances are the only woman who comes to mind is Ellen Gordon of Tootsie Roll—whose husband is chairman of the company.

The situation is not unique to the food industry, according to research conducted by Korn/Ferry International, an executive search firm. Korn/Ferry took a look at the five most senior posts after CEO at Fortune 1000 companies and found women held only 3 percent of them in 1989—up from 2 percent in 1985 and 1 percent in 1979.

What's keeping women from the executive suites? For one thing, the odds of rising all the way to the top are slim for anyone—male or female—and there

are far fewer women than men at the next-to-the-highest levels. Beyond the statistical realities, though, is there a glass ceiling blocking women from the most senior jobs? The issue troubles some upper-level managers.

"My next job could be a problem," predicted a woman vice president for a food industry supplier. "It's easier for men to relate to women as peers and in middle-management jobs than in senior-level positions."

Glass ceilings tend to remain invisible until you are almost upon them, said Leah Peters, vice president of research and development for the bakery products division of Pillsbury. "Five years ago, I would have said why no, there are no limits to my career. You don't really start thinking about it until you are pushing those limits."

"I don't blame glass ceilings on individuals," Peters continued. "We're really dealing with a society that was raised in a certain way . . . In general, white males are very comfortable with white males. There's a high trust factor because of similar backgrounds, similar operating styles. And trust is probably one of the biggest factors when you get to the senior levels of an organization."

Women run up against a "subliminal" bias among many of the men who run corporate America, agreed Lydia Lewis, executive director of The Committee of 200, an international organization of businesswomen. "I don't

think it's going to change until men's attitudes change. And I think that's a generation away."

There are plenty of other theories to explain why men still dominate in senior management. One is that women don't build up the kind of experience they need because they change jobs more frequently. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, female executives, administrators and managers stay with the same employer about five years on average, compared with seven years for men.

Many start their own businesses because they want more flexible schedules while raising families or because they're not satisfied with their corporate progress. For Karen Scott, formerly director of strategy for a Kraft venture group, it was a combination of both.

"If you start trying to combine marriage with family, you start looking at your career with a very hard eye," said Scott, who left Kraft in 1987 after the birth of her second child. "In essence, corporate life started coming up short on the perspective of reward vs. effort," continued Scott, who felt Kraft management tended to favor men at promotion time. She started a baby products catalog company, and a year and a half after the first catalog rolled off the presses, the company is making money.

"One thing that women haven't exhibited in great numbers [within corporations] is staying power," said Mary Ellen Roth, vice president of sales and marketing for Pet Inc.'s branded express foods group. Roth thinks it's more socially acceptable for women to bow out from the corporate rat race. That can be a plus for the individual, she said, "but as a result, a lot of men tend to think women don't need to work and may not be there long-term."

Roth's analysis is on target, according to a poll conducted by Catalyst, a New York City firm dedicated to expanding opportunities for women. In a survey of executives at the top 1,000 publicly held companies, 48 percent of respondents said women are perceived as having less career commitment than men.

Lack of broad-based experience also holds women back. Mary Anne Jackson, a former Beatrice Cos. executive who founded a children's food company called My Own Meals, said she had to make a concerted effort at Beatrice to get the kind of diversified experience she needed to advance. Her first challenge was to break out of Beatrice's accounting department. "I'm

telling you, I made waves," she said. She systematically pursued appointments that gave her experience in financial planning, strategic planning, new product development, marketing and finally, operations. "If you want to get ahead, you have to plan on doing a lot of things on your own," said Jackson.

Janice Novak, an international division vice president for the NutraSweet Co. at age 34, credits her rapid career ascent to her diversified background and willingness to tackle new challenges. "I've almost changed careers five times," she said.

Women who have climbed high on the food industry corporate ladder tend to be risk-takers unafraid to scale new heights. That's important, because male managers are seen as more gutsy than their female counterparts. In the Catalyst survey, 43 percent of respondents said women are perceived as showing less initiative and taking fewer risks than men.

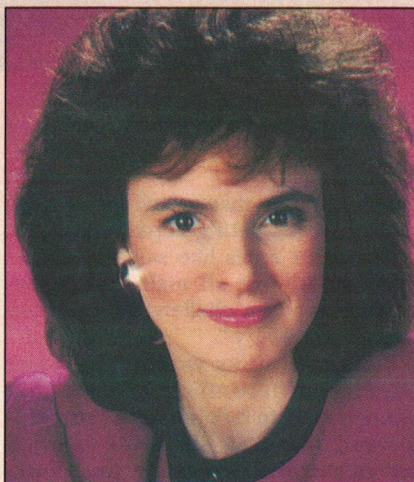
Most women food executives said they don't think their gender has affected the progress of their careers. Those who said sexism exists said they minimize it. Witness the food executive who overheard a male colleague say as an aside, "When did they give women the right to vote?" after disagreeing with her at a meeting. "There are still good old boys out there," she said. "I really try to ignore it."

Not focusing on gender also means not trying to conform to male models of success. "There's less of the trying-to-be-a-man approach," said Linda Brandt, manager of strategic business planning for Borden's grocery and specialty products division, adding "that usually doesn't come off very well, anyway, quite frankly."

The good news for women in the workplace is that the odds are stacked in favor of advancement. Women already represent more than 45 percent of the total work force. By the year 2000, two out of three new entrants to the labor force will be women. And they are getting the credentials needed to reach the top. Almost half of the new attorneys and more than a third of MBA recipients today are women.

"The people who are entering business right now are used to women as peers," noted Brandt. "As that group moves through to the upper levels of management, I don't think it will be as difficult [to advance]."

In this special report, *Food Business* profiles some of the women who already are shaping the U.S. food industry.



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MARY ANNE JACKSON
MY OWN MEALS



"There's less of the trying-to-be-a-man approach."

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BORDEN

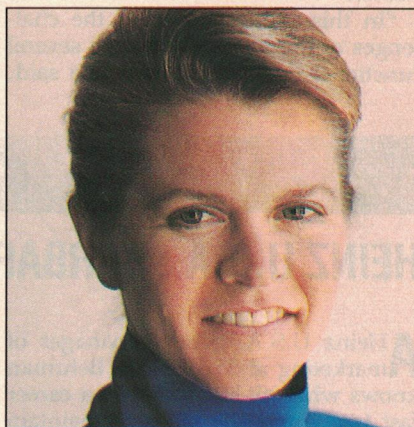


PILLSBURY: LEAH PETERS

Leah Peters, a Pillsbury corporate officer and vice president of research and development for the bakery products division at 37, offers this advice on how to get ahead in the business world. "The first and foremost thing for anybody, regardless of who you are, is to pick a field that you truly enjoy."

Peters loves her work. She's been at it for 14 years since joining Pillsbury as a product development scientist after receiving a master's degree in food science from Michigan State University. Her career ascent at Pillsbury has been rapid; she was a manager within five years.

Never one to over-analyze or shy away from a challenge, Peters was appointed a vice president with Pillsbury's Godfather's Pizza unit at 32. In that job she supervised the revitalization of the Godfather's menu with the development of new products, including pizza by the slice, a thin-crust pizza and a stuffed pie. She also introduced new technology that cut pizza bake times in half and shortened service times by 20 percent. Peters felt moving outside the corporate headquarters and getting involved in the turnaround represented a major career risk. Now, though, she looks back on it as "a major



"Pick a field you truly enjoy."

step forward."

"I think the kind of responsibilities I've been given now are a direct result of the experiments taken early in my career."

Peters is heading the development of a product called Toaster Strudel, which made its debut in the mid-'80s and will be reintroduced this fall.

In her current vice presidential role, Peters oversees a staff of nearly 100 scientists, engineers and technicians responsible for developing new bakery technologies and products.

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