

A Matter of Culture

Do minority women face issues other entrepreneurs never do?

By Aliza Pilar Sherman

Women business owners deal with different issues than their male counterparts. But do minority women face still different issues? Not necessarily. According to the 2002 [study](#) *Women Business Owners of Color: New Accomplishments, Continuing Challenges* by the Center for Women's Business Research, women entrepreneurs, regardless of racial or ethnic background, consider business growth the most pressing issue they face, with other key concerns including capital and cash flow, employees and the economy.

"Being able to grow in the face of competition" is Wanla Cheng's major concern. The fortysomething president of [Asia Link Consulting Group](#), a New York City multicultural market research firm with revenues of more than \$1 million, says maintaining a positive reputation and quality output are high on her list.

Tripling sales by 2005 is the goal for Helen Martinez, founder of [Chica Inc.](#), a San Fernando, California, clothing brand dedicated to empowering Latinas, with sales approaching \$2 million.

Lena West, 30-year-old African American founder of \$3 million [xynoMedia Development](#) in Yonkers, New York, says that managing growth, client satisfaction and project diversification are her top issues.

As they work toward their goals, these entrepreneurs draw upon lessons learned from their parents and grandparents. "My father raised us to cherish our Chinese heritage and to be standard bearers-to project a positive image of Chinese people," recalls Cheng.

"I was raised with an emphasis on family, food and friends," says Martinez, 43. "My parents showed me that with determination and a strong work ethic, anything can be accomplished. Although I did not speak English when I started school, education was the number-one priority with my parents. Even though my father had to drop out of college to work, he insisted [my siblings and I] all go to college."

"My parents are from [the South]," says West. "I was raised to laugh at myself, to be God-fearing, honest, dependable, respectable-but still eager to ask questions and to know my craft inside and out. I stand on the shoulders of many people who did many things they did not want to, need to or have to just so that I can have [what I have]. I feel great that I can excel in this industry and share my knowledge with young black people who are looking to start in the industry."

Yet succeeding in business also requires these entrepreneurs to step outside the cultures they were raised in. "Overt aggression and chest-beating are attributes frowned on in Asian cultures. Subtlety and modesty are desirable traits," explains Cheng. "However, these values are highly counterproductive in American business culture-more so in New York City business culture. Being aggressive-without being unpleasant-is important."

"Being female and Latin, the lack of role models had [a big] impact on me," says Martinez. "In pop culture, Latins are portrayed as gardeners, maids, busboys, nannies. My mother was a stay-at-home mom who wasn't able to offer many insights into the work world, so I felt very alone in my entrepreneurial pursuits."

Is ethnicity an issue in business? "Because of what [my company does]-multicultural market research with a focus on Asian Americans-my ethnicity and, more important, my multicultural background combined with my blue-chip business experience works for me, not against me," says Cheng. "It gives me more credibility. Personally, I don't let my color stand in the way of living my life and am fortunate it has not."

"If you know what you are doing and are passionate about it, color and ethnicity will be irrelevant," says Martinez. "The only important thing is that your business is capable of reaching profitability."

"Race is always, and always will be, an issue," says West. "Next question?"