

## FEATURE

Black Digerati  
Powerful Forces

### **African American women take on the high-tech world**

*By Bridget Mccrea*

Lena L. West realizes that any African American woman who thinks about starting a tech company today will likely get discouraged if she flips through an industry magazine. "A quick browse reveals very few people who look like me," she says. It's a realization that could make any budding entrepreneur shy away from a potentially lucrative business opportunity, says West, founder and CEO of Yonkers, New York-based xynoMedia Development ([www.xynomedia.com](http://www.xynomedia.com)), a company that helps early-stage firms develop and implement technology solutions.

Put the magazine down, says West, because there are many African American women forging ahead in a male-dominated field--including her. Founded in 1997, West's firm expects to gross \$1.2 million in 2001. She started the company with \$225,000 in savings, most of which she earned as a technology consultant. In 2000, West's achievements garnered the attention of AlleyCat News, a publication that covers emerging growth companies in the New York and tristate area, which named her one of the top 25 women in Silicon Alley.

But early on, West says, she was disheartened by the scarcity of black women in technology. Little did she know that she would become her own unique selling proposition. "The opportunity exists for precisely the same reasons that many African American women would write it off--because we stand out," West explains. "These days my best selling is done in a roomful of people who don't look like me--because I stand out, and because they remember me."

Deborah Lansdowne, president and CEO of Host Technologies Inc. ([www.host-technologies.com](http://www.host-technologies.com)), in Falls Church, Virginia, has had similar experiences, and says that at any meeting or industry function she's usually one of maybe two African American women in the room.

Prior to starting Host Technologies with her partner and chief technology officer, Kevin Swarns, Lansdowne worked in the telecom industry. Today, their 10-employee company consults with and develops software for technology companies. Host Technologies is on target to reach \$2.5 million in revenues this year, a 400% increase over 2000, says Lansdowne.

As the first Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce member of the board of directors, who was African American, a woman--and the owner of a technology company, Lansdowne attributes part of her success to her uniqueness in the industry. "Chances are good that [clients] will remember my name while they may not remember someone else's," Lansdowne adds. "It's wonderful."

#### MEETING CHALLENGES

When Peggy Dodson started Urban Broadcasting Co. Inc. (UBC, [www.urbanbroadcasting.tv](http://www.urbanbroadcasting.tv)) in Harlem, New York, five years ago, she was immediately disappointed by the few African American mentors in the field. Her hybrid company--an entertainment-telecom firm that recently launched a national cable network targeting the urban multicultural market--crossed several industry lines, leading Dodson to choose her mentors from several areas.

"The convergence of cable and technology fascinated me, so I sought out mentors who were familiar with that concept and formed alliances with them, though there was a definite lack of African Americans involved [in those fields]," says Dodson, UBC's founder, president, and CEO. "It was rough in the beginning because of that."

Because there aren't many African Americans in the upper levels of technology, Dodson says, there are even fewer mentors. That holds true even more for African American women. "At the higher levels, it's a very macho, male-oriented industry," she explains.

As a budding entrepreneur, those barriers discouraged Dodson, who says that along the way she hit several walls that nearly prevented her from realizing her goals. For example, she says finding credible business consultants, attorneys, and even accountants, was a real challenge. At one point, she got taken for a large sum of money by an "investor" who was actually a con artist out to swindle start-ups, says Dodson.

Today, UBC has 10 employees, a number Dodson expects to double in the next few months. She's expecting \$5 million in revenues this year, and expects to double that next year, thanks to the recent addition of the cable network. Dodson invested \$600,000 of her own money in the venture, and received \$5 million in outside funding from a few angel investors. She's forged alliances with the likes of Sony, Motown Records, and OlympuSat, but has kept control of the company by remaining its largest shareholder.

"I own the stake that's going to keep UBC a legitimate representative of the urban multicultural market," says Dodson, "because if we lose that, we would lose the very power and voice that I created the company on."

Farther south, at Host Technologies in Virginia, Lansdowne says one of the biggest challenges she's faced in the technology field is a lack of respect from male counterparts and customers. "In many cases, I go in and find that they want to put me in a niche or make me a generalist," she explains. "Some people are just not as quick to accept us as subject-matter experts."

For example, Lansdowne says one of her larger accounts had a habit of pigeonholing her company. The account expected Host Technologies to do basic, low-level staff augmentation--an area outside of Host Technologies' core competencies. "We do business process assessment and full-life cycle software development, but they wouldn't let us compete for that, and told us that they had it covered already," recalls Lansdowne.

When that account approached Lansdowne about another noncore activity, she put her foot down. Fortunately, that didn't drive the client away. Lansdowne actually came away with the type of projects she wanted in the first place. "I finally caught their attention. They took a step back and said, 'Wait, let's talk about what you really do and see if we can find you some opportunities,'" she recalls. Lansdowne says she's also learned to clearly outline her company's focus, its core competencies, and past achievements early in the relationship. This helps her avoid confusion down the road.

Just saying no on several occasions has had a positive effect on the business. For starters, she says, customers recognize that Host Technologies won't touch business that's outside of its area of expertise, and that shows clients that the company has confidence in what it can produce. "It actually puts us in a positive light," says Lansdowne. "We show them that we know our business, we know what we're doing, and we're not just out here to make a buck."

#### FORGING AHEAD

Despite the challenges, all three agree that technology is an open opportunity for African American women entrepreneurs. Dodson adds that no entrepreneurial venture is easy, and each has its own unique set of roadblocks and challenges. Getting past them is the key, she says. "Now is the right time for us as African American women to really seize the moment in this industry," says Dodson. "If you truly believe in your business and have a passion about it, success will follow."

West, a volunteer for the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), sees infinite opportunities ahead for African American women. Recently, she spoke to a group of multicultural students at the Mott Hall magnet school in Harlem about precisely those opportunities.

"I try to push the little girls to see technology as an avenue, for never in my life have I been so free since deciding to make technology my thing," says West. "I have many choices in front of me right now, and I try to get that across to them."

And while the opportunities are certainly there for the taking, West says the key is to know yourself, your company, and your areas of specialization inside and out.