

# Entrepreneur

## LEADERSHIP / WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

# This Tech Founder Was Often the Only Woman in the Room When She Started Her Company. Here's Her Advice for Young Entrepreneurs.

*Despite the obstacles, she has no regrets.*

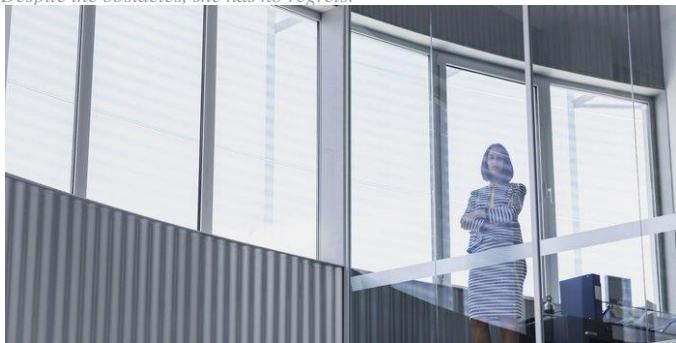


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- Guest Writer  
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People look at me today and ask me how I got here. To be honest, I ask myself the same question. And it occurs to me that, in answering, there might be something that young [entrepreneurs](#) -- especially young women -- can learn from.

I began my career as a commercial banker with a stint on Wall Street at the Bank of New York. Abandoning Wall Street, I went on to break gender barriers at both 3M and GE, which eventually landed me in Silicon Valley in the late '70s. When I saw the first personal computers, I understood their potential right away: They gave the means to connect one-on-one with customers -- attract, capture and retain them -- in a way that would personalize the communication, making it almost as good as a face-to-face meeting -- at a fraction of the cost.

I looked around for a [technology](#) that could do that. When I saw there wasn't one, I realized there was an opportunity to create one: a digital, personalized [marketing](#) technology that could be adapted to various B2B and B2C scenarios. That led to the founding (in 1985) of what is now ChannelNet, co-located in Dearborn, Mich., and Sausalito, Calif.

At that time, there were virtually no woman-owned tech startups that supplied services to the automotive, home improvement and [finance](#) sectors.

I vowed to be the first.

It wasn't easy. In the first three years banks refused to lend to us or offered half of what a comparable man would get. (So we bootstrapped).

It was hard to get meetings. When I began pitching our services to chief marketing executives at automotive manufacturers, I was often the only woman in the room. At one point, I worked for well over a year with my team and spent a small fortune to win the business of a major truck company. In the middle of the final presentation, the CEO stopped the proceedings and said, "I would never let a woman-owned company do anything as strategic or critical for me as this project."

I prevailed because I believed in what I was doing and let that passion show through. I did my homework and demonstrated how ChannelNet's digital technology would help boost sales and retain customers. Our first big "win" was BMW, when we convinced the CMO that we could "sell better using tech" than he could without it. In 33 years, ChannelNet has worked with more than 250 companies in 16 different industries.

So, how did we get here? I believe there are five key factors:

## **1. Believe in your vision.**

I understood tech's ability to connect one-on-one with customers (B2B and consumers) in a way that hadn't been done before. In 1985, no such technology existed. So, why not be the one to create it? My advice to beginners: Push the envelope. And don't let anyone talk you out of it.

## **2. Believe in yourself; don't let gender factor into it.**

Whoever you are, you're an entrepreneur with a vision. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. When I started no one -- man or woman -- was doing what we were doing. I took that as a plus. When we succeeded, gained clients, we did it as ChannelNet, not as a "woman-run company."

## **3. Have a plan -- but be willing to adapt.**

When we started, our goal was to help companies and sales channel partners connect one-on-one with their customers. Our business was external-facing. In 1990-93, due to an economic downturn, we adapted ChannelNet's technology to connect sales teams with companies via internal systems so information could be delivered in real time. As a result, our service changed from "want-to-have" to "have-to-have."

## **4. Stay tough; history repeats itself.**

Over 33 years, I've seen the good, the bad and the ugly. We've survived three recessions -- including the Great Recession -- and come out stronger because we, too, had to separate "have-to-have" from "want-to-have." In the toughest times, we cut costs -- staff, overhead -- even my own compensation. Each time, ChannelNet emerged stronger and grew faster when the economy turned around.

## **5. Have no regrets.**

When I look back at my 33 years in this business, there's nothing I'd do differently. The tough times -- and mistakes -- were all part of the learning process. They helped me grow, get tougher and survive. And in a sense, ChannelNet helped "crack the glass ceiling" in the automotive industry. I'm proud of that.

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