

Entrepreneur and her 'for women only' firm

FOR DEBRAH Charatan-Berger, as for many women, starting her own business was the quickest way to the top. It was a shortcut past the hurdles that block the progress of young ambitious females. At 26 she is the president of Bach Realty Inc., an all-woman commercial real estate firm in Manhattan that sells buildings for investment and development.

Residential real estate has long been the domain of women, but it is only in the past decade that women have begun to make inroads in the male dominated field of commercial real estate. Charatan-Berger decided to capitalize on the situation by putting an emphasis on hiring women for her sales staff.

An all-woman commercial real estate firm is both newsworthy and noteworthy—a not unwelcome advantage in a highly competitive field. But Charatan-Berger also likes the idea of giving other women a leg up. For one thing, she feels she's repaying a debt to an older woman who acted as her mentor at the first real estate firm where she worked. For another, she feels she's able to create an opportunity for women to aim high—in the direction of six-figure incomes. It frustrates her that so many women are stuck making \$10,000 or so a year.

"I think so many women are without direction and I saw what I could do for women," she explains. "Women have been put down so much. They think they're nowhere. You've got to tell them they're fine. They're okay. And then they just blossom. Their lives change. Their relationships change."

The first woman she hired was getting divorced and needed a job to support herself and two children. She had no previous real estate experience but picked it up quickly under Charatan-Berger's tutelage. "It changed her whole life," Charatan-Berger says. "Her kids go to camp now. She bought a car. She's independent."

She prefers to hire women without real estate experience and train them from scratch. But from clothes to conduct she insists that her staff be all business. She has one iron-clad rule: never sleep with a client. "I tell all the women no man is going to spend a nickel more on a deal if you sleep with him. This is too small an industry to get that kind of reputation."

In spite of her views, she does not see herself as a feminist. "I'm not a women's libber," she says. She clearly

a good 10 years younger than most of the women who fought for the changes that now allow some women to play games once marked for men only.

Charatan-Berger grew up in Queens, began working hard—a 40 to 60 hour week—at age 14 in a local bakery. "She was interested in making money since she started to walk," comments her mother, who now helps out in the office three days a week.

After graduation she began looking for work. "But I really had no skills.

The first thing they ask is 'can you type?'" she recalls. "I was out of work for six weeks. It was devastating."

Finally she got a three-day job writing party invitations for the head of a real estate firm. "I thought maybe they'd see what a hard worker I am and keep me on," she says. And they did. "There was an older woman there who saw something in me."

The woman, a properties manager, was planning to

leave the firm, and groomed Charatan-Berger to take over her job. I said to her 'how can I ever repay you?' She told me that someday I'd be in the same position. That's really how the whole thing started about hiring the women."

For the next five years Charatan-Berger managed the company's buildings. At 22 she was earning \$25,000 a year. Then a new partner joined the firm and wanted to bring a man in over her. It was time to move on.

She got a job leasing commercial space, while she worked on a college degree at night. When she finished the degree and had a year's leasing experience she was ready to go into business.

A friend offered her a closet-size office in the basement of his Madison Ave. building. "It was a good address. Nobody knew I was in the basement. I borrowed \$2,000, a desk and a typewriter. My parents bought me three suits. I believe you will only fail if you give up. I told myself I wouldn't even think about stopping for a year."

IT WAS VERY lonely at first. Sometimes my mother would come down and spend a couple of hours with me. I would take my owner's book and get on the phone and ask owners if they wanted to sell their buildings. I probably called a couple hundred before I got one to sell. I opened in May and made my first deal in September. I made \$4,300. Each deal I did I made more money. Once I started, I was doing a deal every month.



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