



A Better Measure of Success

Three Vancouver women entrepreneurs give back through business

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Jackie-Rae Avery, co-owner of Bandidas Taqueria, had a vision to create a community hub. She wanted it to be an inclusive, welcoming space for the people who, in many ways, helped open and get her restaurant running. When Avery and her business partner Aiyana Kane were denied loans from the bank, friends and community members pitched in with donations, investment offers, and general help. “People helped paint, demo, run errands, brought food, everything,” she remembers. Notably, when their front window was smashed just days before opening, the community collected donations to have it fixed. Avery was touched, as she believed they had already used up all their favours. “In the beginning we always felt we needed to give back because the community

was giving so much to us,” says Avery, “and it still feels the same way.”

Bandidas opened just over a decade ago in January 2009, at a time when banks were not lending as freely to female business owners as they were to male business owners. Rejected by the traditional business route, women entrepreneurs had to find alternatives—and a few Vancouver women may have redefined success in the process.

Barriers to Success

A Statistics Canada report, “A Comparison of the Performance of Female-Owned and Male-Owned Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises,” found that in 2011, female-owned businesses were significantly less likely to be



Left: Jackie-Rae Avery created Bandidas Taqueria as a community hub.

Right: Stephanie Taylor, owner of West Coast Dog Walking, has always been a dog-lover.

Below: Kaya Dorey, shown at First Pick Handmade Market, is a frequent vendor at local markets.

authorized debt financing than male-owned businesses, and the interest rate for authorized debt financing was higher for women than men. Consequently the number of businesses owned by women continue to be a fraction of those owned by men. Specifically, the same report shows that in 2014 women owned 15.7 per cent of enterprises, compared to 64.6 per cent owned by men (the other 19.7 per cent being co-owned by men and women). This is despite the fact that women have consistently made up over half of university business programs since 1992, according to the sixth edition of Statistics Canada’s “Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report.” These financial barriers are a hindrance to female entrepreneurship and help explain why women like Avery have had to rely on alternative support from their communities to open a business.

Community Engagement

While community investment may be necessary for many women to cover start-up costs, it can also help build a market of supporters-turned-customers, as it did for Stephanie Taylor, owner of West Coast Dog Walking. Before starting her company, Taylor founded a volunteer project and soon-to-be registered charity, West Coast Pet Project. The organization rescues animals from high-kill shelters, and then fosters and rehomes them within the greater Vancouver area. “I already had this reputation of ‘dog person’ in the community,” Taylor says, “so people trusted me.” Typically, the people who rescue dogs from West Coast Pet Project will later hire West Coast Dog Walking for their walking and boarding needs. This built-in clientele allowed Taylor to make a living off her long-time passion.

Prior to starting her business, Taylor had found herself disillusioned with working for companies with corporate missions and





Above: West Coast Dog Walking now has three vans in operation.

Left: Taylor gives her dog a smooch in the park.



values she simply did not believe in. The need for an emergency brain surgery in May of 2015 inspired her to finally take the leap and become an entrepreneur: “I thought, I don’t want to live like this anymore. When I’m healed and recovered, I just want to do what I want to do.” That is exactly what she did, without the need to supplement her income with a part-time job or side hustle. Taylor credits her immediate success to her sincere passion for her work, as well as her prior involvement and relationships within her community. She values her former experience in customer service jobs over her traditional business school training, as she says working face-to-face with people every day undoubtedly prepared her most for operating a successful business.

Similarly Avery and Kane were deeply engaged with their community prior to opening Bandidas. They were both active members of the East Vancouver community as part of the East Van Social Cycling Club, The Carnival Band on Commercial Drive, and as local teachers. Their existing community became their eager customers when they opened the restaurant, resulting in the lucky problem of being too busy for their small staff. Avery recalls that the customers stepped up in a big way: “People would even get up from their tables and help serve or do dishes on some of those early, busy nights.”

Bandidas was able to turn a profit in less than a year, which allowed Avery and Kane to give back sooner than they expected. They prioritize hosting numerous community events and fundraisers and donate significant amounts of money to two main causes: environmental action in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and social justice. When asked why these causes are important to

her, Avery says “it’s just the right thing to do as a business in the community. That is how healthy communities are created and run and give back what we’ve received.”

Value-based Business

Like Avery and Taylor, women are most likely to own businesses in the service industry; this is in contrast with the male-dominated goods producing industries, according to Statistics Canada report “Women-owned Enterprises in Canada.” Service-based businesses are more reliant on face-to-face interactions with customers, which presents more opportunity for relationships and community building. At the same time, women-owned businesses are typically less profitable, according to the same report. A common explanation is that women statistically have less technical education in areas such as engineering, math or computer technologies, which are historically more profitable sectors. However, this narrative minimizes the possibility that women are choosing to be community focused. It diminishes the notion that profit is not, and perhaps should not be, the main driver for their business.

The idea of creating a business without growth and profit at the forefront might seem radical. Tessa Jordan, PhD and department head of Sustainable Business Leadership at BCIT, says that giving back and ensuring that you contribute to—rather than simply profit off—your community is characteristic of value-based business and not traditional profit-based business. Dr. Jordan says that we cannot continue with a growth-based economy. “We live on a finite planet,” she says, “businesses need to work on closing their loop so that waste products become an input—for the business in question,

or another business.” To her the connection between environmental and social values is unbreakable: a sustainable business is one that works within planetary limits, is socially just, and ensures that everyone involved has their basic needs met.

Jordan believes companies need to adopt cooperative and social-enterprise business models that actively measure social and environmental costs. She hopes that business programs evolve and meaningfully incorporate these models into their curriculum, as the business world has been slow to adopt them. While there are relatively few sustainability-focused business programs offered in BC, “the tendency is for these programs to be more academic or research based,” she says. The goal of BCIT’s Sustainable Business Leadership program is to provide hands-on training that prepares graduates (historically just over 60 per cent women) to initiate and develop social and environmental values successfully into the diverse businesses they work for and with. The program hosts numerous guest speakers and connects students directly with mentors through their Capstone Project, allowing students to see that a real community exists and successfully runs value-based sustainable businesses.



Jordan hopes that students will realize that “if you can’t find a way to live your values in an existing organization, you [instead] might build something from the ground up.” Program graduate Kaya Dorey did exactly that when she created Novel Supply Co.

A Better Standard

Novel Supply Co., which Dorey describes as “conscious apparel for the West Coast urban adventurer,” was borne out of frustration for a lack of sustainable options. After doing a research project on textile waste, she was shocked to learn how little businesses and consumers like her were considering product ‘end of life,’ and how much waste was being created as a result. “I was pissed off,” Dorey says. She echoes Jordan in stating that BCIT’s program was the only option she could find that included practical (versus theoretical) sustainability business training. Just as she struggled to find a school that shared her values, it proved even harder to find a company to work for that was “doing it all the way” in sustainability. Even after establishing her business, she still fights to ensure she is meeting her own standards.

“You have to be vocal about your values,” she says, as they are not yet standard in the industry. “I literally have to remind [my manufacturer] every time to not throw away my fabric scraps.” She explains that the only established solution for textile waste offered in Canada currently is down-cycling, where large machines turn fabric scraps into insulation and stuffing for chairs and other products; however, smaller designers typically do not create enough waste to be accepted. While waiting for the industry to catch up is incredibly frustrating, Dorey has been able to partner with other small, like-minded organizations to come up with creative solutions in the meantime. For example, she has partnered with Abel Wear,



Above: Avery taking care of business.

Left: Bandidas Taqueria features art by local artists.



Bandidas Taqueria regularly hosts live music and board game nights.

a self-proclaimed “social enterprise non-profit” in Vancouver. Dorey sends her textile scraps to Abel Wear, where they are used to teach women with barriers to employment how to sew. These women are then matched to local sewing jobs, typically at sustainable start-ups. Partnerships like this give Dorey hope that a value-based business community is growing.

Unconventional Approaches

One thing value-based businesses have in common is their unconventional approach to growth. Dorey is only interested in growth that is sustainable, which to her means Novel Supply Co. is unlikely to become a multinational brand. Instead she wants to focus on the growth of the sustainability movement. “I want to inspire other brands,” she says, “because it is going to take a lot of collaboration and teamwork to make real change, which is kind of the opposite of competition and what traditional business usually brings to mind.” For similar reasons, Avery has struggled with the decision of whether to open more Bandidas Taqueria locations: “Being small is great for local communities, but if you are a business that is value-based and running on integrity, expanding could have a bigger impact.”

Within three years Taylor’s West Coast Dog Walking has seen significant traditional success in that it has grown its walking territory, acquired another business and partner, expanded to three trucks, hired three employees and is in search of two more. The next goal is to continue at this size and hire someone to take over day-to-day business operations, which will allow Taylor to reinvest her time and profit into an upcoming documentary and awareness campaign. She plans to film her rescue work in Mexico, where she has already formed connections with other women and dog rescues. When asked if giving back negatively

Dorey says it’s important to be vocal about your values.

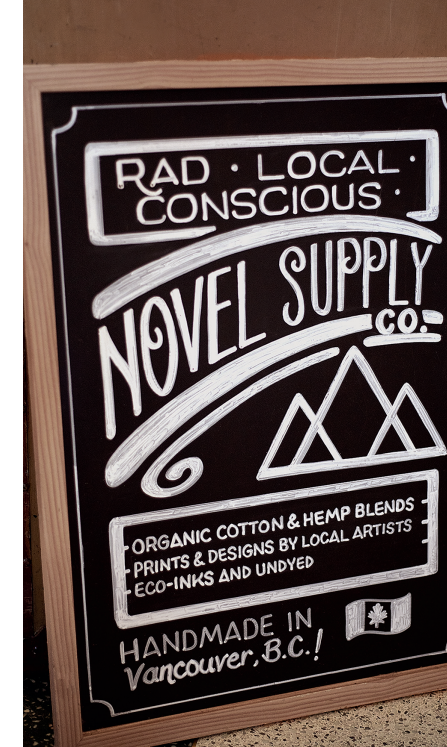


affects her profit, Taylor says it “takes up a lot of my time, which in turn affects my income directly [as] a business owner. But it’s ultimately what I want to do.”

Dorey has also had to give up a certain amount of personal profit to align her business with her values. “Initially, as you’re trying to pioneer this movement, it is more expensive,” she says. Though she is hopeful that as consumers demand manufacturers to be more sustainable, the cost will go down: “It will become more accessible if we all commit to it.” So if profit growth is not the primary measure of success in a value-based business, what is?

For Dorey, Taylor, and Avery, the ability to use their profits to benefit their community is what drives them. While all of their businesses are different, they each operate to make their community better, beyond the product or service they sell. As Jordan says, to evolve beyond a growth-based economy businesses need to consider their social and environmental costs. Entrepreneurs need to reinvest in the community they are a part of, rather than simply profit. Perhaps a business’ ability to give back is a worthier measure of success.

In 2017 Dorey was recognized by the United Nations Environment Programme



as one of six Young Champions of the Earth for her work on Novel Supply Co. When asked what the greatest impact this recognition had on her, she notes how it has connected her to a larger community of innovative and brave individuals changing the industry. “As much as I’m alone in my day-to-day business, I am not alone in this movement.” And to her, that feels like a success. ♦

Dorey says Novel Supply Co. is conscious apparel for the urban adventurer.



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