

Lynne Lister, managing director of X-Press Legal Services says that Franchising encourages women because it enables them to go into business for themselves

YOU CAN HAVE IT ALL

Every year more and more women go into business, many of them into franchising where they are making a big contribution to the overall success of the sector in the UK. Indeed, the latest NatWest/bfa survey reveals that women, either solely or jointly, own half of all franchise units.

With more than 759 different franchises to choose from, in a wide variety of sectors, it is not surprising that people considering become franchisees are bewildered and overwhelmed when they first start their research to find the business that is right for them.

Developed

When franchising was in its infancy, the choices were quite limited. Today, we have moved a long way from drains and burgers and new franchises are being launched all the time - some in traditional and male-dominated trades such as plumbing and car repairs, while others offer innovative services or products that women seem to be especially good at.

Franchisees are from all walks of life, so each person - male or female - has their own unique reasons for wanting to be their own boss. Everyone's criteria for the 'perfect' franchise is also different.

However, the most important things to consider about becoming a franchisee apply equally to men as to women. People should think carefully about whether they are truly suitable for being self-employed, which is very different to having a job. They should be confident they have the moral support of their spouse or partner and, also, ensure that they are realistic about the amount of investment they can afford to make.

Prospective franchisees need to research the market place thoroughly and take advantage of all the advice they can get before selecting individual companies for closer scrutiny. Only when they are sure that they would seriously consider becoming part of a particular business should they approach the franchisor for an initial meeting.

Generally women have the same opportunities as men and are just as ambitious, so franchisors nowadays tend to consider applications from both sexes with equal merit. Certainly in my own franchise, we don't have any bias either way. Interestingly enough, more than half our franchisees are women - but that's just how it worked out.

We aren't interested in a person's gender. What is important is how they present themselves, their abilities and attributes and that they are focused, showing commitment and determination to succeed.

Confident

I think that franchising encourages women because it enables them to go into business for themselves, which many might not otherwise do. Whilst many very experienced and able women are confident about their own competence, they often have doubts about their ability to actually manage a business and need the reassurance of a proven system.

They find it very comforting to be able to pick up the phone and discuss a problem if one arises. As a franchisor, I believe it is very important to be able to spend time with those who need some extra help to boost their confidence after initial training.

That is why women like franchising and the concept that there is always someone there to offer help and advice if they need it. They are attracted to franchising with its security of support and back up - of being on their own, but not entirely alone.

Women are very suitable for franchising because they have the ability to multi-task, which is an invaluable skill in any small business with the constant need to switch from one job to another and manage several different things at once.

Many women also favour home-based franchises because they offer a degree of flexibility that enables them to not work around family commitments, especially in households where women are not the main breadwinner. Inevitably, there has to be some cooperation in most modern families with a working mum to achieve all the important little things in life, like taking the children to school, doing the weekly shop and collecting the dry cleaning.

Working from home can be extremely successful, but it needs to be carefully thought out. Running a business, especially from your home, is a serious undertaking. Anyone who thinks that having a franchise would be a great diversion from the demands of small children and housework is deluding herself.

When you work from home you must be very organised and strict about your time management. You have to develop a consistent ability to ignore all things domestic. As one freelance lady journalist famously said: 'At 10am when you should be at your desk, you're trawling the house for washing.' It's easy to think that you can combine the two roles at the same time, but in reality you can't. The chances are that you will do both things badly.

You need to set up your workplace away from the family, preferably in a totally separate room. Never, ever, allow your young children to answer the phone if you want to be taken seriously as a businesswoman and don't let your teenagers share your computer either. It's a valuable working tool - bar them from using it altogether.

Whether your franchise is home, van or premises-based, you will enjoy the buzz of your achievements and the look of envy from other women when you tell them that you run your own business.

Some of the comments I've heard from women include: "The idea of having my own business and being my own boss was attractive, but I didn't have the confidence to start a business from scratch. Franchising seemed to offer many benefits such as independence and autonomy; but with the support of the franchisor and its established systems."

Intuition

Today we enjoy equal opportunities and women can succeed in any field, so long as they have a steely single-minded determination to do so. But however equal we might be, we should not overlook something that men sometimes struggle to understand and that is feminine intuition.

Some women often know, instinctively, if something is right or wrong. And whilst following your instinct should not be the sole basis for making an impulsive business decision, it can be a good indicator of how successful a franchisor- franchisee relationship is going to be.

I met a lady franchisee once who told me how important chemistry is. She advised people to check out all the business elements first to ensure you're joining a reputable and ethical franchise, then really think about how you feel about the people who own it before making a long-term commitment. This is sound advice indeed from a lady who subsequently became a 'franchisee of the year' in her own organisation.

Another told me: "My husband supported me all the way. The only thing I needed to explore was whether it would be possible to run a real business from home and still be around for my sons. I soon discovered that all things are possible, with good organisation."

Successful franchises, male or female, are those who are self-disciplined and highly motivated. To use the old adage, you only get out what you put in and running a franchise, just like any business, means working hard to get the rewards. Equally, you need to be realistic about what the rewards are actually going to be, especially in the early years when you're building up the business.

I think in this respect women initially set their sights lower than men, who tend to be overly optimistic about how much money they will make. Women too want to earn and enjoy the trappings of success. They are no longer content to do a 'little job' for pin money. They want to be taken seriously in their own right and enjoy the benefits of being self-employed and the independence that offers.

Over the years, recently as a franchisor and previously when I edited a franchise magazine, I've met many very successful women franchisees in a diverse range of industries. They all have a different story to tell, but they all have two things in common - they are passionate about what they do and they are very comfortable in themselves. That quiet confidence and self-belief is vitally important in any business.

Women franchisees have allies too in the increasing numbers of specialist franchise lady lawyers, consultants and bankers. These professional, bfa-affiliated advisers understand all the challenges that women franchisees face and deal with every day because, they too, are mothers and wives as well as working women.

In the 21st century, women really can have it all - but only if they really want to.

WhatFranchise 3.1

