

FEATURED STORY / INDUSTRY SPOTLIGHT

Lee Sanders and the Society of Bakery Women Are Helping Industry Members Connect – and Thrive

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Written by
STAFF



More than 20 years ago, glancing around the room at an American Society of Baking conference, Lee Sanders, who'd been handling technical, legislative and regulatory affairs for the American Bakers Association, and several of the other attendees noticed only a few women were present.

The group of roughly 10 female industry members decided to get together one night during the event. Over pizza and beer, the Society of Bakery Women was born.

Since that first informal gathering, the organization has grown to provide regular virtual and in-person networking opportunities for professionals and students. Through a mailing list and LinkedIn group, the organization connects people from over 90 countries, including baking enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, retail bakers and more. They also assist students who are

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preparing to enter the baking sector through mentoring and scholarships, which are awarded to students at Kansas State University — the only U.S. school, Sanders says, that offers a baking or milling science degree program.

We recently spoke with Sanders, who stepped down from her role as ABA's senior vice president, government relations and public affairs in August, but remains president of SBW, about her career experiences, the role women play in the industry — and some of the ways young regulatory-focused professionals can position themselves for future success in the baking field.

How did you initially become involved in the industry?

I always had a passion for politics and a passion for food.

I worked for a senator from Mississippi, Thad Cochran. It was fun to work on Capitol Hill. Then I went over to the White House and worked for George H.W. Bush in the council's office and at the Treasury Department.

Then, I went to the private sector and worked for the American Bakers Association for almost the last 30 years. I've been so passionate about baking. I was the director of legislative and regulatory affairs, and then I became the vice president of technical and regulatory affairs. I did a lot of regulatory work.

One thing I've loved about this whole experience is every day, you learn something new. That's still true; I'm still learning. I just really enjoyed getting to know regulatory bakery professionals — and the opportunity I had to give back to the community.

Do you have any advice for women who are hoping to enter the regulatory segment of the bakery industry?

There are always issues coming up; there are always new regulatory initiatives. If that's your passion, there are great opportunities in the baking and food industry.

The world is your oyster. Getting that hands-on experience with a company helps — working in R&D; research; quality assurance. There's a lot of opportunity for women in operations; that traditionally has been a man's area, but there are some really standout leaders there. Working your way up, you learn the industry, the company, what's important, and then you build on that.

What's the biggest challenge you've faced working with legislative and regulatory issues?

The wonderful thing about the baking industry is that we're everywhere; so members of Congress and their staff are always willing to meet with us because we have a presence in their states and in their districts.

The most important thing you can do is paint the picture of what new legislative or regulatory initiatives mean for the baking companies, both large and small; explaining what this means, why it's good or bad — making sure you have clear messages that resonate; and then having



the relationships to make sure there's follow-through, and communicating that work to your organization and members.

Different administrations have different views of nutrition and food safety, so sometimes being able to be nimble is important. But all the time, you are basing your actions on the guidance from your members. Everything needs to be member-driven.

What has being a woman and a senior vice president of government relations and public affairs within the food sector meant to you?

It's been wonderful. I take it so seriously. It's an opportunity to make a difference — to represent a wonderful industry and promote that sector. To me, it means making sure you use your skills for the best outcomes for your members.

There have been some conversations recently around the term "badass" and how its connotations suggest women need to act masculine to succeed. What are your thoughts on that notion?

You have to do your homework. You have to be assertive; and sometimes, when you're assertive, people might interpret that differently. I've always found you have to be good — but maybe you have to be better than the men. Maybe you have to make sure you are going that extra mile. It never can hurt.

The business has evolved. The Society of Bakery Women [was] focused on DEI before it was a term. We just wanted to ensure that women had a way to connect and a support platform. I'm just so proud of what we've done and how we've been able to support women in the industry.

Do you have any other thoughts or advice for female regulatory professions in the industry?

Make sure you stay engaged, are up on the latest trends and new initiatives — you can do that through going to the FDA or USDA websites. You can also join organizations like the Society of Bakery Women, the American Bakers Association, the American Society of Baking or the Retail Bakers of America.

Building networks while you're in your beginning stages of your career is really important. Those people will help you. There are folks you can go to for advice, for learning — and [I'd advise] remembering, as [you] move up, to give back and do the same thing.

I've found this industry is full of great people. They're always willing to help. They're willing to give you advice. If they don't have the answer, they'll tell you where to go find it — so be inquisitive. You always want to open yourself up to new opportunities and do your job to the best of your ability.

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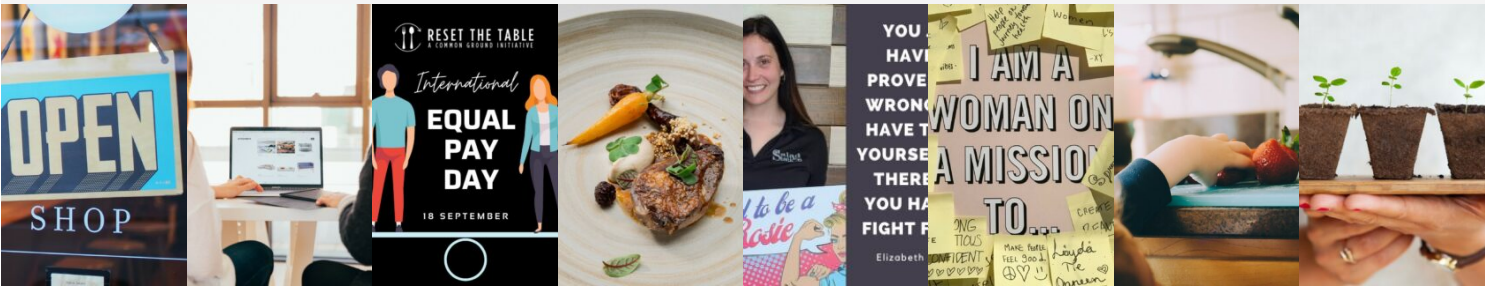
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