

Women on the Web

Center for Women's Business Research
www.womensbusinessresearch.org

Forum for Women Entrepreneurs
www.fwe.org

Fund Isabella
www.fundisabella.com

National women's business Council
www.nwbc.gov

Renaissance Entrepreneurship
Center's Women's Business Center
www.rencenter.org

Small Business Association Office of
Women's Business Ownership
www.onlinewbc.gov
(Includes a list of women's business
centers in the U.S. at
www.sba.gov/womeninbusiness/wbcs.html)

Springboard Enterprises
www.springboardenterprises.org

WIN (The Women's Investment Network)
www.winwomen.org

scene.

Just as Wyant and Abramson are trying to expand that network with their funds, Cynthia Pharr co-founded the Texas Women Angels-Dallas to do the same in her region. "The biggest thing is networking and women in business have not traditionally had the networks to reach the contacts," Pharr asserts. "People often invest in management, and they often invest in management they know, or they know the management's attorney or the management's auditor, and women are just getting into that. Right now, they're outside the world that traditional VCs operate in."

Most venture capitalists, however, are quick to point out that the omission of women from the networks (at least in recent history) is purely unintentional. It's not discrimination; it's comfort.

Whitney Johns Martin, CEO and co-

founder of Capital Across America (as well as fund manager for the Texas Women Angels-Dallas), blames some of it on communication: "Fundamental might be too strong a word [for the differences between women and men investors], but I do believe there are some nuances that make a difference. I believe that women VCs can understand those nuances and it makes it easier for the women entrepreneur in many cases than to deal with other VCs."

When men do invest in women ventures, research shows that feeling "comfortable" extends even to the kind of woman. Ellen Fagenson Eland, associate professor of management at George Mason University, has seen it time and again: "If [she's] a woman who is very much a woman, men don't pay too much attention to those women. They pay attention to the women who are much more like them. Those are the women in corporations who make it to the top, much more than women who are not."

With these kinds of hurdles to overcome, women entrepreneurs are overjoyed to see a few more feminine faces at the table. Women-focused investment firms not only give them a terrific starting point, but these firms also highlight women-led businesses as worthwhile deals. The Forum for Women Entrepreneurs co-founder and CEO Denise Brosseau explains, "If you have women investing and looking for women to invest in, their radar is up.... They're out doing the kind of searching you need to do to find the fewer opportunities that are available for women entrepreneurs."

But Chromosomes Only Go So Far

Of course, having one's radar up is not the same as having one's arms open. Or, more to the point, two X chromosomes do not make a successful entrepreneur.

Investors are there to make money. This point is non-negotiable, no matter how civic minded they are. You won't find any arguments in this crowd, either. Even women business advocates like Brosseau agree, "That's all that should be looked at: great companies and great teams—male, female, green, or blue."

Historically, women have tended toward low-risk, slower-growth ventures—not the sort of thing that will attract VC attention. Studies at the Center for Women's Business Research (CWBR) show that a sea change is in the works, however.

"We're at the beginning of a wave not only of greater interest but of greater action... Firms with more employees, with more revenue, that are faster growing..." says Julie Weeks, the director of research for the CWBR. "The new woman entrepreneur has much more business experience in sales, marketing, senior levels of management, as compared to the women who started business twenty years ago. We're also seeing greater levels of education, and they have a greater appetite for business growth... As people in the investment world wake up to the quote-unquote missed opportunity, I think we'll see a lot more investments in women-led firms."

But Weeks issues yet another warning: women won't get far without understanding the world they're in and how to navigate it. She states, "There's an awful lot of women who said, 'Equity? Capital? I don't want that. What's that? Why would I want that?...' There needs to be more education for women who are leading growth-oriented companies to let them know about the options available for them."

Before the funding comes the fight for funding—and this is an arena to which women have only just opened the door. The rules, the playing field, even the name of the game are largely mysteries.

Resources to the Rescue

But such games can be learned, and there are many groups (including FWE) that formed to give women the tools they need—their game shoes, if you will.

"Whether it be helping women to find role models, whether it be helping them to find the kind of data they need...." Brosseau says, "those kinds of processes that we have put in place will just give someone a leg up, it will give them the kind of credibility and access to the kind of people they need to be more successful. And obviously our statistics are proving it out over the last several years."

Brosseau highlighted Springboard Enterprises as a key resource as well. Springboard, however, is an unusual combination of information and action. They provide resources (in the form of boot camps, mentors, and more) to both entrepreneurs and investors—and they also provide forums to bring the best of those two worlds together. President and CEO Amy Millman simply explains, "We don't invest capital in women; what we do is invest the community in women."

Millman also points out that female-focused funds are a boon, but not a panacea. "There aren't really a whole lot of women-led investment firms... It's an opportunity; it's a way to get your foot in the door.... Now there's a way to get there. And you're going to see tons of [women-led investment firms], so there are going to be tons of deals."