



Providing Opportunity for Women

Flexible Packaging Leaders Discuss Their Careers and Opportunities for Women and Others

By M. Diane McCormick | June 29, 2023



Women running flexible packaging companies evangelize for the industry and its opportunities for people with talent and drive. And they agree that networking, the guidance of mentors, and the power of flexible packaging provide an open field for advancement and career fulfillment.

That is not to say they haven't faced challenges.

"When you get closer to the end of your career, you look back and realize all the challenges and struggles you faced along the way are what shaped you," says Kathy Bolhous, chair and CEO of Charter Next Generation (CNG) and past chair of the Flexible Packaging Association (FPA).

Although advancing in a male-dominated industry isn't easy, she and others say gender has not been a defining factor in their careers.

"My biggest challenge is not that I am a female in a mostly male field," says Madeleine Robinson, CEO and owner of LPS Industries, LLC based in New Jersey. "My biggest challenge is that I am trying to run a privately held company in the United States. Believe me, it's tough."

Road to Leadership

As the ninth of 10 children from a working-class family, Bolhous would listen to the stories of her mother, a factory worker. One lesson was that opportunities for women were limited, including in management. "That is what fueled my desire to go into manufacturing," Bolhous says. "I wanted to prove that as a woman, I could rise through the ranks in a male-dominated industry."

Bolhous began her manufacturing career in the automotive industry, always the first woman to hold her posts in materials planning, quality engineering, plant supervision, and plant management.

Her career met its defining moment when Appleton Paper Inc. offered the opportunity to lead its flexible packaging business and execute growth through acquisition. She made the tough decision to uproot her family from Michigan and move to Wisconsin. "Having the opportunity to build something from the ground up fueled my entrepreneurial spirit," Bolhous says.

She funneled her vision for a best-in-class specialty film company into CNG, which she joined in 2006 through its predecessor. Since then, sales have grown from \$60 million in 2006 to more than \$1.5 billion.

Robinson had business in her blood, learning from her father—an owner of a packaging company—how to invest in the stock market. At age 17, enthralled by Wall Street, she earned her Series 7 license, gaining the right to sell and buy securities.

Despite earning an MBA in investment banking from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, she and her sole female classmate could only find jobs in commercial banking, while their male peers went straight into investment banking.

Corporate lending almost made her lose her mind. She pleaded for—and obtained—a transfer to the trading floor, saying she would sweep the floors or get coffee just to be part of a trading floor at a major money center bank in New York City.

"Three years later, I was running the division, and two years after that, I was appointed as executive vice president in charge of worldwide trading, asset and liability management, and portfolio investments," she says.

Summer work in her father's business had never sparked Robinson's interest in packaging, but just after she pulled open a golden parachute to exit her bank, her father died at a young age. She decided to return to the business and figure out her next steps. That was 35 years ago.

"Much to my surprise, the packaging industry was—and still is—very interesting," she says. "The products produced are essential to everyday life."

Science Degree Starts Career

Unlike Robinson, Dhuane Dodrill joined her father's medical packaging company as soon as she earned her degree in chemical engineering. Her father, Packaging Hall of Fame member Bob Dodrill, was a Dupont converting-industry consultant when he purchased a printed rollstock company. It was the 1970s, and he had a vision of pioneering single-use sterile medical devices.

"There was no pressure at all for me to join the company," says Dhuane Dodrill, CEO of the company that today is PAXXUS, Inc. "He wanted me to do what I wanted to do—what I would enjoy. I thought I had a really good opportunity, and I think I made a good decision."

Augmenting her technical skills with management training has brought about "an evolution" in her practices. "You learn to appreciate different personality types," Dodrill says. "You learn to understand what your end goal is. What do you need to do, and how do you need to behave and work with others to achieve that end goal?"

Promising Field for Women

Female leaders want emerging female leaders to know that flexible packaging offers opportunities and the chance to make a difference.

Bolhous reminds people that flexible packaging is a female-friendly industry impacting female-friendly products. Plus, flexible packaging's wide spectrum of career paths includes purchasing, sales, product development, manufacturing operations, human resources, and finance. More opportunities materialize as the industry constantly reinvents itself. "This is a fun, fast-growing industry that has already changed the game in carbon footprint reduction," she adds. "There are many break-throughs in sustainability that have come to market in the past few years—and many more to come."

Gender bias lingers, but today's female leaders don't see an immensity of barriers. Twice recently, Dodrill has been mistaken for a customer service representative at high-level meetings. But she says she continues "trying to focus on the needs of the broader industry and making sure that it's being represented well."

"I really just try to focus on the work," she says. "Hopefully, it isn't about gender. It's about the work that people do. Hopefully, younger women in the industry are seeing that and seeing where they may be able to go."

To attract more women and other talent, industry leaders need to shed their unconscious biases, Dodrill adds. "We need to encourage that broad base of people, regardless of their background," she says. "We need to help them find their voice, take advantage of the opportunities that are out there, and find their rightful place in the industry."

Getting Involved

Dodrill's advice for women and all others pursuing industry leadership is to get involved in industry groups for networking and education. "And don't passively get involved," she adds.

"Certainly, you can learn by sitting in the room and just trying to absorb information, but if you volunteer your time and become somebody that's actually doing the work, you're going to learn so much more," she says.

Bolhous also cites networking as a key to attaining leadership. In this relationship-based industry, connections with peers create links to their own far-reaching networks across the value chain. "The FPA provides the opportunity to bring the industry together, not only to network but also to elevate and highlight the many benefits of flexible packaging," she says.

Robinson found that her strong financial background and "a bunch of good people" helped her gain traction in her second career. "My contacts at FPA were invaluable," she says. "Many of those guys really helped me out, as was the case on Wall Street. I owe all of them a big debt of gratitude. When you learn from the best, you become the best."

Except for "some prejudice on the part of stupid people," women face many of the same challenges that men face, Robinson says. "If you meet up with a person that stonewalls or blocks you, then move around them," she advises. "Get them out of your way. Change your department or your company, and just go for it."

The industry's many qualities should attract talent, Robinson says, even though there is a constant battle against opponents of plastic packaging. It's a growth industry with opportunities for those who are "bright, innovative, hardworking, and anxious to succeed." Rapid advancement is possible, with accompanying pay raises and a sense of accomplishment. Solving problems, an everyday occurrence, provides gratification.

Nurturing Talent

Helping women feel welcome is just one aspect of diversity in flexible packaging manufacturing, female leaders agree. Dodrill's company is about "looking for those bright stars and really helping to develop them." That includes expanding the internal talent pool by hiring women and other traditionally underrepresented people for the manufacturing floor to cultivate their talents and guide them into leadership positions.

CNG aspires to "a culture of belonging, meeting people where they are versus changing them to fit a certain mold," Bolhous says. In 2020, the company formed an employee resource group, called United, to foster a culture of inclusiveness in manufacturing and provide opportunities for women to grow and develop. Its 275 members—60% female, 40% male—celebrate and empower women while creating allies within the male employee base. "Looking ahead, we need to broaden our support for underrepresented voices in our company, whether that is through additional employee resource groups or other programs that align with the needs of our people," Bolhous adds.

Bolhous worked in partnership with CNG owners KKR and LGP to express their belief in the company's people by introducing employee ownership in 2021. Recognizing that corporate equity ownership is the biggest driver of America's wealth gap, the initiative offers company shares to employees, who benefit from payouts as the company gains value. The effort gives a voice to the entire workforce and helps them recognize how their day-to-day actions affect the company's long-term prospects and profitability. "Everyone has a role to play," Bolhous says. "Get off the bench. Get in the game."

Mentors Make a Difference

As the daughter of a Packaging Hall of Fame member, Dodrill hasn't had to look far for a mentor. "I've been very, very fortunate to have somebody from a technical side who was unsurpassed," she says. "He has a very strong ethical approach to how he does business. That has certainly shaped who we are as a company and how we continue to do business."

Mentors are guiding lights, agree the female leaders. Bolhous was welcomed into the industry, even as a newbie, by such leaders as Rob Tiede of Sonoco, Peter Schottland of American Packaging Corporation, and David Staker of Plastic Packaging Technologies, LLC. Today, she is especially honored to pay forward the inspiration and mentorship she received from Eileen Gordon, president and CEO of Alcan, who was FPA's executive vice chair when Bolhous entered the industry in 2006. "Seeing a woman in a leadership role of this prestigious organization made me believe

that I could do it one day, as well," Bolhous says. "Having served as chair of the FPA for the past two years, I hope I can be a role model for others like Eileen was for me. I am always encouraging others to go for their dreams and believe in their ability to achieve great things."

Robinson finds it exhilarating to be a woman in a predominantly male field. "Many male colleagues taught me everything that they knew and encouraged me to be my outrageous self," she says. "A few were patronizing, but I didn't seek them out as mentors, advisers, or confidants."

Blazing a Path

Female leaders are fans of flexible packaging for its power to create opportunities for talented people.

"It is a wonderful packaging solution," Dodrill says. "I think we all need to be working on creating more end-of-life solutions for flexible packaging, and there's a huge amount of work being done in that area."

For Bolhous, challenges and fulfillment go hand in hand. Trailblazing sometimes made the hurdles feel higher, and she had to strive to be accepted in addition to simply getting the job done. "But that's what has given me the courage and the confidence to keep pursuing my dreams," she says. "I have developed a fierceness and determination, which feels great, because it was earned through hard work and perseverance. I hope that my path has made it easier for women who come behind me."

M. Diane McCormick is a freelance writer and editor based in York, Pennsylvania.

Ohio Tech Hub to Invest in Susta... Next>

Events

MAY 28-JUN7

drupa 2024



SEPTEMBER 17-19

FPA 2024 FlexForward® Conference



NOVEMBER 3-6

PACK EXPO International 2024



[See All Events](#)



[Issue Info](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Contact Us](#)



FlexPack.org

© FPA 2020 - All rights reserved