

NO MORE MS. NICE GUY

DO NICE GIRLS REALLY FINISH
LAST IN THE BUSINESS WORLD?

BY ALIZA PILAR SHERMAN

48, founder of Meyler & Co. Inc., a \$1.4 million Los Angeles firm that represents private homes as locations for print, TV and film. "But there's a thin line between nice and stupid." From the beginning, Meyler made it a company policy to always be extremely polite, courteous and respectful, yet at times, she believes she gave in too easily to client demands or let customers take advantage of her.

Her solution? "I explain why I am unhappy, but [do it] in a calm and logical fashion, [suggesting the client] look at this from my point of view," Meyler says. "This underscores that I'm willing to help, but they shouldn't expect favors every time."

"Don't be a doormat," advises Lois P. Frankel, corporate coach and author of *Nice Girls Don't Get Rich: 75 Avoidable Mistakes Women Make With Money*. "Providing outstanding service and standing up for yourself are not mutually exclusive. Be willing to walk away from a deal with someone who doesn't treat you fairly, or to refuse service to someone who has taken advantage of you in the past."

One lesson Meyler has learned in the four years she's run her business is that niceness doesn't always pay. "Clients would still deal with my competitors even though they complained about the awful service they received," she says. "I realized I couldn't rest on my laurels of niceness, and started to become more firm on certain issues."

For Erika Mangrum, president of Iatria Day Spa in Raleigh, North Carolina, her niceness affected employee relations. After bending over backward for a pregnant employee, Mangrum realized all her employees would expect similar treatment, even to the company's detriment.

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"I focus now on being fair and consistent," says Mangrum. "That's better than being nice. If people know there are policies and rules to begin with, they understand decisions better." Mangrum, 38, recalls a time when she was making an effort to get tougher with employee policies. She overheard some employees talking about a new policy she had just implemented, and she swung to the other side of the behavior spectrum.

"I stormed into the kitchen and said, 'If anyone has an issue with this, you can see me,' and stormed out," Mangrum says, admitting she lost her temper because her feelings had been hurt. "I behaved in-

DO WOMEN BUSINESS owners succumb to the "nice girl" syndrome? "My biggest struggle is remembering that it actually pays to be nice," admits Catherine Meyler,



consistently and drove a wall between me and [my employees] for two weeks before I apologized." Now she offers forums for discussion about policies with her employees and tries to explain the big picture, choosing to compromise on occasion. "It takes more time to do that, but it's worth it."

"Many women have adopted the 'nice girl' syndrome as a result of the expectations and lessons learned in childhood," explains Trudy Bourgeois, author of *Her Corner Office: A Guide to Help Women Find a Place and a Voice in Corporate America*. "Little girls are taught to play nice, put others first, and always think about other people's feelings. These behaviors are not bad, but when misapplied, they can produce a wicked brew filled with frustration, internal strife and stress," she says. "Women business owners who are too nice often make bad business decisions, experience poor relationships and miss opportunities for success."

Adds Bourgeois, "Accept that your success depends upon your ability to overcome the 'nice girl' syndrome. You can't please everyone. You must do what's right for the business and effectively manage the expectations of others."

ALIZA PILAR SHERMAN (www.mediaegg.com) is an author, freelance writer and speaker specializing in women's issues.

THAT'S FAIR:

Being consistent with your policies is key to maintaining good employee relations, says Erika Mangrum.