



# Empowering Women

***More than a year in, SSA's Women's Council is tackling the gender gap.***

*By Laura Fries*

While women, the majority of customers in the self storage market, have been influencing the industry in design and marketing, they remain the minority in self storage leadership. In an effort to educate and connect women in this unique business, some of the top movers and influencers in self storage formed the SSA Women's Council a little over a year ago.

More than half of the population of the United States is female, yet they fall far behind in the number of leadership roles. As recently as 1995, there were zero female CEOs on the Fortune 500 list, according to Pew Research. Women of color face an even wider gap.

The best way to combat disparities, research has shown, is to provide networks and mentorships in business settings. The SSA Women's Council is a way for women in the industry to do just that, through education and empowerment.

The idea for a women's council had been percolating for a while, as the few females in this predominately male business would connect and see each other at conferences and trade shows over the years.

"The Women's Council came together as our industry grew," said Theresa Gallas, founder and chairman of the SSA Women's Council. Gallas, a sales manager with Janus, has more than a decade of experience in storage. "It took the form of women meeting at each show for decades past, and naturally evolved into a committee of like-minded professionals who shared a passion for self storage and growth," she said.

## **Support System**

The group provides a unique support system that works for both newcomers and veterans.

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Nancy Martin Wagner, Women's Council board member and vice president of Chateau Products, has been at nearly every SSA trade show in 24 years, but the Council provides something new. "The networking events are professional, supportive and not intimidating," said Wagner.

Michelle Bakva, Women's Council board member and VP of marketing and sales at StorQuest Self Storage, confirmed the feeling and said that in a male-dominated field it can be very intimidating to come to a trade show.

"I think that this industry in particular could be intimidating," she said. "I have been in this business for 10 to 12 years and there were very few women, especially at first, at the trade shows. It is about a 55-plus, male-dominated industry, so it can feel overwhelming coming in with a different demographic. It has evolved even in the last few years, bringing in more females, but the Council helps them find their voice and have the same opportunities as their male counterparts."

The inaugural education session at the 2018 SSA Fall Conference & Trade Show in Las Vegas was a successful gathering, bringing together nearly 60 women in self storage to discuss different issues, exchange business cards and share best practices.

"The platform has been created to help others network, ask questions, grow professionally and explore the self storage industry for the resource it is to so many of us," Gallas said. "With each new conference, we are seeing new and familiar faces alike joining us as we promote learning from each other and sharing what has helped shape us in our roles."

And while it is gender specific, the Council also brings competitors together in a way that can only help business for all, added Bakva. "It's nice that aside from where we work and who are our competitors, we are all part of the same industry, we have the same goals. With our empowerment, we can elevate our industry."

For many, the Women's Council is personal and business. Not only are the women networking, they are honing skills that help get the job done.

"Through the Council, I have found friendship, mentorship, and have also worked with some of the women to procure business," said Anna Dwyer, senior associate of acquisitions at City Line Capital. "I have tremendous respect for the trailblazers in the industry, and I believe the Council is another stepping stone to encourage more women to find their voices in the industry and step into leadership roles."

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## Social Media

The group has an active Facebook page where all SSA members are encouraged to join and discuss topics central to business. There, the group has shared ideas such as how to balance home and work life, set boundaries and give a respectful “no.”

Currently, the Council is working on a new mentoring program, which rolls out this year. Coincidentally, January is National Mentoring Month, an idea created by the Harvard School of Public Health in 2002. For those interested, the Council is putting together a questionnaire that would pair mentors with mentees. Those interested in the mentoring program should contact Ginny Stengel, SSA’s SVP of education and membership.

“When joining the group’s Facebook page, you’ll see some of the conversations we’ve had at our networking sessions. Anyone who can relate to these is invited to join us at the next session in San Antonio,” said Stengel. “This amazing, driven group is only going to get stronger through our formalized mentor program and continued networking sessions. The SSA Women’s Council is led by some real movers and shakers in the industry.”

*Forbes* has reported that mentoring programs are crucial to workplace culture for a number of reasons. They boost morale, keep people motivated and interested in their jobs, and increase job retention and satisfaction. A Sun Microsystems case study found that participants in mentor programs were five times more likely to get a pay increase or a promotion, while a Cornell University study showed they also boost minority representation.

“Once we start marketing it and representing what it is about, we can turn it into something dynamic for the



industry—and that is the endgame,” said Bakva. “By hearing the concerns of women, the hurdles they face, that helps form what the Council wants to do. And it is a diverse group, covering mom-and-pop owners who do everything as well as mid-size operators with one specific role. The mentoring program expands our reach and connects the people that can’t always attend the trade show. Through the Council, they can stay and feel connected and supported and get the resources.”

The value of mentorships has unexpected benefits, wrote Naz Beheshti in *Forbes*: “Employees are happy, engaged, and productive when their individual needs and the needs of the organization are in sync. The extrinsic rewards of salary and benefits might be enough to get top talent in the door, but it will not be enough to retain employees or to bring out their best efforts. Employees reach their full potential when their job also brings intrinsic rewards—the feeling of doing meaningful work that is connected to their own personal and professional development.”

When employees are engaged and productive in their industry, it benefits everyone in the company. Bakva said her male counterparts love what the Council is doing and would be the first to admit it is a male-dominated business. She said they have provided resources and opportunities, because they all love the business and are happy to see it evolve.

Gallas has also felt universal support throughout the industry.

“I am contacted all the time by people who want to get involved,” she said. “The interest has been overwhelming, as well as the desire to sponsor Women’s Council events. It’s an incredible thing to witness in this great industry.” ♦

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For more information on the SSA Women’s Council, contact Ginny Stengel at [gstengel@selfstorage.org](mailto:gstengel@selfstorage.org).