

# How Women Can Make it in the Ultimate Man's World

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More women around the world are launching their own companies, especially as the pandemic has displaced many of them from corporate work. These women already face more hurdles than men do in obtaining financing, navigating bureaucracies and recruiting talent. And in some particularly male-dominated parts of the world where men make most of the decisions, women business owners face a societal barrier as well.

To determine what it takes for women to make it in the most challenging environments, we studied the journeys of three successful women-led family ventures in Bahrain, which along with other Arab countries has a culture and business climate dominated by men. We saw that the key to building successful, thriving businesses was in shaping others' perceptions. This involved pursuing three goals: individual legitimacy, market legitimacy, and – the ultimate sign you've arrived – royal legitimacy, or getting validated by a member of the royal family. Their stories offer some lessons for all women who are striving to launch their own ventures when the odds are stacked against them.

## Legitimacy challenges

All new businesses, whether male- or female-owned, must establish legitimacy in the eyes of others, especially potential customers and investors. A key step is overcoming what business sociologists call the "liability of newness," or people's natural distrust of something new and unproven. Being part of a well-established family business can confer some legitimacy on an entrepreneur. But when a daughter chooses to buck societal norms and do it on her own, as our research subjects did, they start with a disadvantage. Studies have shown that in some societies, even fathers and other male relatives won't see women as potentially successful, while they are more likely to give their blessings to sons who want to strike off on their own.

## What We Studied

To understand what it takes to build legitimacy in this man's world, we looked at how three women-led businesses worked to influence others' perception of them. The women-owned businesses included Annada, founded by sisters Nada and Noor Alawi, a company that turns work by local artists into luxury fashion accessories; Obai & Hill, established by Wafa Alobaidat, which helps its clients develop their brands; and Tru Active, an activewear company established by sisters Dana and Hala in 2015. All three companies have been able to grow and reinvest in their business.

To get a sense of the major phases and milestones of building their businesses, we studied these founders' social media posts and press and media coverage from 2010 to 2018, and also interviewed them ourselves.

We painstakingly analyzed nearly 15,000 Facebook and Instagram posts and images with the goal of identifying critical events and milestones, product introductions, alliances with potential clients and influential people, the founders' passion and accomplishments, media coverage and other important moments. When looking at the images we considered the context and translated what was in the image into words that could be analyzed along with the written content.

## What We Learned

Our research and interviews concluded that the women went through three phases to nurture the perceptions of their businesses: individual legitimacy, market validity and royal validity. At each phase, meritocracy played a role: the founders' posts emphasized their education; new initiatives; key milestones, awards and certifications they earned; and any recognition or new alliances with well-known companies, retailers and celebrities.

In the earliest stages the women worked to form their individual legitimacy by ensuring that the business idea is aligned with their own interest and passion and by influencing the perception of few but important individuals from their own private circle. For example, Nada shared her business idea with her sister, who supported the idea and signed on to help her create the business. Similarly, the sisters Hala and Dana had many discussions between them to fine-tune the business idea and identify how they could complement each other's experiences, skills and resources. Wafa had solid support from her mother and a very close friend who always encouraged her to keep going with her business idea.

Once personal legitimacy was established, the owners tackled the next phase: market legitimacy, to create something out of nothing and stoke perceptions of legitimacy before they had a track record of sales. For example, the sisters behind Tru Active started a women's biking community to raise awareness about their business. The sisters behind the Annada brand gained buzz from working with famous artists to design their product lines and encouraged high-end retailers to sell their items, sharing the good news on social media. This phase also included gaining legitimacy by obtaining financing and recognition from government agencies. Our owners could have taken the easy way out and put up their own seed money for their ventures, but shrewdly recognized that getting outside financing would cement their legitimacy more effectively. Wafa, the owner of Obai & Hill, took a course that allowed her to be exempted from the hefty registration fee for new businesses; the sisters behind Annada took advantage of an incubation center established just for women.

The final stage was getting recognized by a member of the royal family, which in Bahrain is the ultimate validation of legitimacy and makes the rest easier. Wafa's company won the Bahrain Entrepreneurship Award established by the royal family, which posted about it on their Instagram account. She saw her access to other members of the royal family improve afterwards. Most importantly, Wafa told us, was that potential customers started to feel "OK, they have been validated; they must be good. Let's work with them."

## Takeaways

What does this mean for other female-led ventures around the world, including in the majority of countries without monarchies? We offer 10 points to consider:

1. Establish your personal bonafides first: when you don't have any sales, you must play up your own accomplishments.
2. Identify one or two people in your close network who can lift you up both in good and bad times.
3. Use family affiliations the right way (it's OK if you learn the ropes by working with a family business but need to firmly establish your own identity.)
4. Ensure that you understand the critical issues in your community and your country, and try to link your business activities to address and solve these issues, such as employment, environment, health or art.
5. Show that you've merited your recognition through hard work and through resisting the urge to take the easy way out with obtaining financing, even if you and your family have plenty of money.
6. Identify and approach role-models who can guide and mentor you.
7. Give back to your community by sharing your experiences and knowledge and by mentoring others.
8. Be a "yes-person" to participate and have an active role in local events, or create your own events.
9. Share milestones, especially new business. Having media coverage is always a plus.
10. Social media is a powerful tool; use it wisely and genuinely to publicize new initiatives, memberships, alliances, affiliations and achievements.

## Read More

Sumaya Hashim, Lucia Naldi and Magdalena Markowska, "[The Royal Award Goes to...: Legitimacy Processes for Female-led Family Ventures](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1877858520300851)" (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1877858520300851) Journal of Family Business Strategy, July 10, 2020

