



VICKIE J. LEWIS

As an account manager at a waste-management company, Vickie J. Lewis was downsized from her position in 2000. Her next job, as an independent contractor, compiling data for waste, chemical and environmental projects, allowed her to see that she had enough professional contacts and work experience to have a business of her own. Lewis started VMX International, an environmental-engineering consulting firm that helps businesses in the United States, Canada and Mexico dispose of everything from plain paper to hazardous materials. In its first year VMX snagged major clients and generated \$1 million in revenue.

THE TRAUMA OF A LAYOFF

"It was the first time I'd ever been laid off and I didn't want it to happen again. After I was downsized, I worked as an independent contractor for an engineering-consulting firm. My job was to compile statistical data for a project that would transport waste across the country. I'd previously worked in transportation for an airline and a railroad. I thought, *I could do this as a consultant!* Traveling for a year as an independent contractor, I saw how I could do this on my own."

PICKING BRAINS

"I knew a lot about the waste industry, but not about running a business. Networking was not just meeting people, but also about asking many questions. I called professionals in the industry, bounced some of my ideas off them and asked, 'What do I need to do? How did you develop that department? What has made you so successful?'"

SERVICE IS POWER

"I learned that the waste industry is a good old

boys' network—and that good old boys' network is real! It's a field run by men, and they want to talk to a guy. But being a woman and a minority doesn't matter to me. It matters that I give good service, and when you give good service, you develop a track record. Then you can go toe-to-toe with anyone and say, 'This is the work we did and this is how our clients rated us.'"

GIVING BACK

"I go to high schools and talk with students about recycling and nontraditional jobs. My husband is a minister, and we tithe to eight different churches. And I just bought a Curves fitness franchise on the northwest side of Detroit. It was part of giving back, because our community had no gym."

MAKING IT HAPPEN

"Put together a winning team that believes in your vision and will work hard. You can't do it alone. Have a good foundation and trust in the Lord. And at the end of the day and on the weekends, have fun and live!"