

Ellen Rohr

## 'Do I Look Like A Plumber To You?'

*It's time to invite the other half of the population to the party.*



When I was invited to speak at the Office Depot's Women's Success Strategies conference, I was not sure that I wanted to participate. I have shied away from "women only" programs because I felt they were, well, discriminatory. In a traditionally male industry, I have always felt welcome and embraced by my compatriots and associates. I have never found being a woman to be a disadvantage.

Also, I have never before been around one thousand women (the expected attendance at the conference). Would a fight break out? Would we all start to mood swing in the same direction? I was afraid.

As one who likes to face her fears head on, I chose to attend. I decided that I would be at-the-ready to expose and condemn any man-bashing. Off I went to attend the conference.

When I was introduced for my program, the panel moderator shared my biography. The crowd of women laughed at the mention of my plumbing industry experience. The microphone was turned over to me, and I asked the audience, "Do I look like a plumber to you?" The response was an outburst of laughter.

I laughed, too, as I confessed that I am not a plumber. I don't look like a plumber, if your idea of a plumber is a white man carting around a few extra pounds and exposing a gap between his pants and shirt. Isn't that how plumbers are depicted on TV and in magazines?

How sexist and discriminatory is that?

**Where Are The Women?** Then it hit me. I am deeply respectful and

admiring of plumbers. Plumbing is a great career. Why are there so few women who choose it? While plumbing is a physical trade, women are not physically incapable of performing plumbing tasks. Shouldn't you have the proper tools and help if you are going to lift more than 50 pounds? (Only a plumber with a problem-free back and pain-free knees should answer that question.)

When I was president of Benjamin Franklin Plumbing, we had zero, zip, nada women plumbers on our team. Gosh. Why not? During my decade as a columnist for *PM* magazine, I have met and written about only a couple of women plumbers. Since I wrote those articles, those women have left their companies and no longer work as plumbers.

Interesting. Maybe there is a reason to pro-actively *promote* women in business — and in plumbing. So, I relaxed my prejudice about the women-focused format of the conference. And, I learned a few things.

Here are some highlights of the conference:

- Barbara Walters shared stories from her amazing career. As an ambitious journalist, she broke through the "glass ceiling" by becoming the first woman anchor on national evening news. Co-anchor Harry Reasoner was neither supportive nor amused. Barbara was dismissed.

Determined to succeed, she pursued the most powerful and interesting people on the planet and got them to sit down and talk with her. What determination! She didn't let her

Illustrated by Peter Bono