

No Pipe Dreams!

Lessons Learned By A Plumber's Wife

By Ellen Rohr Photo by Dale Novak



You Know You're a Plumber's Wife When...

You were offered a cross-section of 3/8" copper pipe as an engagement ring.

OK, maybe my husband-to-be, "Hot Rod" Rohr, was just joking when he presented me a copper pipe engagement ring. He wasn't really that naïve!

But he always had a way with women, which led to our first meeting, marriage, and eventually, a rocky start together in the plumbing and heating business.

I met "Hot Rod" when he was offering motorcycle rides to unsuspecting young women at a ski resort in Utah. I was one such woman, and subsequently became Mrs. "Hot Rod" Rohr. How could I pass on a name like that?

A Troubled Start

When we married, I immediately became "A Plumber's Wife." Before then, I'd held the noble titles of grape picker, lifeguard, oyster shucker and waitress. Eventually, I became a manager at an upscale restaurant in Salt Lake City. Even though I used the plumbing every day, I had absolutely no real understanding of the plumbing world. I never thought about what happened once I flushed.

I entered the plumbing business blindfolded and headfirst when my husband's business partner, Richard Yox,

literally worked himself to death (more on that later).

Yox kept the books at Hot Rod and Yox, and when he died, my husband declared he didn't want to do the paperwork. He wanted to focus on plumbing.

I had a degree in business administration, so I figured I could handle the books for his small plumbing and heat-

"I entered the plumbing business blindfolded and headfirst when my husband's business partner, Richard Yox, literally worked himself to death"

ing company. I told Hot Rod, "I'll do the paperwork, and you turn the wrench. We'll make lots of money!"

Tips From The Trenches

Of course I soon found out that nothing I learned in school applied to running a small business. I did a terrible job. Hopefully, you can learn from my experience. That's why I'm offering these tips to help you dampen the pain of running a plumbing and heating business:

Think more highly of yourself!

You're not just a plumber. You're a highly skilled professional who knows how to keep sewage from mixing with fresh water. Because of this, plumbers have saved countless lives by reducing the spread of major illnesses.

Charge more for your services. But to do this, you've got to look and act professional. Show up on time, wear clean clothes, use good manners, and keep your hands away from those finger towels in the bathroom! Even though I now appreciate a plumber's job, I also have an inside perspective of what really matters to a housewife.

Beware of the family-run business.

This can be a real challenge. My first recommendation is to stay away from a family business. But, if you must get involved in one, establish the roles of everyone involved and stick to them. Create an organizational chart, post it and hold everyone accountable.

Don't be a martyr. This is where our friend and business partner, Yox, comes back in. Don't ever get the idea that you're the only person who can do the job, and if you don't do it, nobody else will. When Yox died, he had just worked a 60-hour week and wasn't feeling well. He basically worked himself into the grave. In the end, the business survived, but we really miss Yox.

To ensure your business survives, keep score. Your balance sheet and income statement hold the keys to getting and staying profitable. Learn to read them, and always keep track of the numbers so you know how your business is doing. When the numbers improve, you'll learn it's fun to keep score!

From her initial, rocky introduction to running a plumbing business, Ellen Rohr has recovered nicely. She is president of Benjamin Franklin Plumbing® - The Punctual Plumber™, one of the fastest growing plumbing franchises in the United States. As a speaker and columnist, Rohr regularly uses wit and self-deprecating humor to share wisdom from her two decades in the industry. She is the author of books about pricing and accounting.