



Sharon Avent

**President & CEO,
Smead Manufacturing Company**

Sitting across the table from Sharon Avent, I'm struck by several "c" words: calm, competent, composed. She's soft-spoken; yet she exudes power. I definitely would want to be on her side of a bargaining table.

As we discuss her business, it's clear why she is successful. She is deeply committed to high standards, worked her way up in the family business and she keeps an eye on future trends.

Sharon started to relax as the conversation turned to family and she spoke of her mother, who was also her business mentor. She said she loves horses; she used to show them and that's how she met her husband, Terry. By now, Sharon is glowing and a whole new set of words spring to my mind: loving, loyal, likable. Here's a recap of our interview.

What are some of the experiences or situations that propelled you to where you are today? My family has owned Smead, a privately held, woman-owned manufacturer of office filing products and records management systems since 1916, so I am a third-generation owner and a second-generation woman owner. I was always motivated, but once I took over the presidency from my mother, I became passionate about the company's continued success. You have to constantly be thinking of new ideas or you will perish.

Did you have a mentor or role model? Who was it? My mentor and role model was my mother, in both my personal and business life. When my father passed away in 1955 and my

mother stepped in to run the company, she never listened to those who said she couldn't do it. Here she was, a widow with two small children and an eighth grade education, and she was determined to make Smead a success. Forty-three years later she named me as her successor, knowing that she had done what she set out to do.

What are some of the obstacles you faced and overcame? I think employees at Smead assumed I would get special treatment because I was the president's daughter, but everyone quickly learned that was not the case. I started out as an hourly employee and punched the time clock just like everyone else. Once I became president, I had to learn to balance my personal and business life better and to set priorities. Although I had to give up showing horses, I still take pleasure rides with my husband.

Looking back, is there anything you would change or do differently? Although my mother was my friend as well as my mentor, it would have been nice to have a contemporary role model—someone of my own generation.

What message/advice do you want to share with other women? As a woman, take time for your friends and family. Be there when they need you. As women business owners, I think the most important thing we can do is network. Get involved in women's business organizations and industry groups, and swap ideas with your peers. Join local civic organizations and stay in touch with your community's needs.