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Juliana Choy Sommer is a tireless advocate for women and minority small business owners

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Juliana Choy Sommer's aspiration to own a business began when she was just a child.

Her father, who worked as an electrical contractor, showed her what it took to be an entrepreneur when he started a business in San Francisco in 1976. At just 3 years old, she remembers spending hours playing inside the office of her father's company and knew that someday, she, too, would be a business owner.

At age 21, that dream became a reality when she became the owner of Priority Engraving, which was also started by her father. The company created nameplates for electrical contractors and over time, it grew to a full-service signage company. In 1998,



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she changed the name to Priority Architectural Graphics. Her company has now manufactured and installed thousands of branded signs and graphics for private and public-sector clients around the Bay Area.

Juliana Sommer is president of San Francisco-based Priority Architectural Graphics, Inc.

A tireless advocate for small business owners, Sommer is making her mark on the city.

Your father's company was one of the first nonwhite union electrical contracting companies that joined the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). How did that impact you? As the first nonwhite, immigrant-owned company to become signatory to Local 6, the local union to IBEW, this was a big deal. It was a big step for a small Chinese contractor to do work outside of Chinatown in the mid-1970s.

This story about "stepping out of your place" is metaphorical to me. My father "dared" to do work outside of Chinatown and parlayed the experience to business growth. He and other business leaders willing to step out broke down barriers for me and others like me. I'm a female, nonwhite business woman in a male-dominated arena. If I didn't see others step out ahead of me, it would be a little more daunting, right?

How did your dad's experience shape how you do business? When you grow up in an entrepreneurial or business-centric family, you are taught that working for yourself is not only possible but has many advantages. Later, in my case, running my own business became not just an option, but a preference. I enjoy the ability to execute on my vision of what success can look like.

What is the origin of Priority Architectural Graphics? My father was an electrical contractor and needed labels for his equipment to identify his work. So he would buy labels, but they were often made incorrectly. Eventually, he bought an engraving machine to make them himself. This became a side hustle when he started selling them to other contractors and launched Priority Engraving. After I graduated from college in 1995, I took over this business from him.

Did you have mentors along the way? The first decade at the helm, I did not. As I've matured as a business owner, I've found it valuable to reach out to consultants and coaches for many aspects of the business, from organizational strategy to biz dev, marketing and more.

Equally as important, I lean heavily on a network of other women executives at Women Presidents Organization. We meet monthly to stay grounded and connected. We learn from each other, share resources and keep each other from getting too lonely because, frankly, it can be lonely as a leader at times.

Why is it important to partner with other women or minority-owned businesses? I've seen many women and minority small business owners that are just starting out have the skills and experience in their trade, but lack the confidence to advocate for their business. Their hesitation may come from language barriers, lack of access to capital or simply old tapes and stories in their heads.

As a woman and minority-owned business leader, I can help show other leaders that with a clear vision, leveraging the right relationships and continuing to innovate product, they can chart a strong course for the future.

How have your partnerships proven successful for business growth? Networks are so important — in good times and in bad. We have benefited from the openness of several general contractors who have actively chosen to diversify their subcontractor and supplier base to include businesses like mine. The construction industry is generally a very different looking industry than when I started 25 years ago.

This willingness from larger general contractors and owners to meet and work with small companies has an incredibly stimulative effect. For example, we worked at SFO with Hensel Phelps years ago on a small temporary signage project that was valued at just a few thousand dollars. This general contractor's willingness to work with us gives us the opportunity to scale our company as SFO scales its capital improvements.

What does it mean to be an advocate for local businesses? I'm on the San Francisco Local Business Advisory Committee and an active member of several associations, such as the American Contractors Association and the Council of Asian American Business Associations. I believe that advocates for small business are essential to keep a healthy economic ecosystem intact.

How has your passion as an entrepreneur helped you lead, especially during crisis? Entrepreneurial thinkers are by nature creative and resilient. When you're also a business owner, you are in a unique position to be able to seek out other like-minded entrepreneurial thinkers to hire and work with.

Periods of crisis test all of us, but they also have silver linings. This is why I love tests that truly challenge me. The creativity and resiliency which are born in these tough times help take us to new levels of performance.

What's the industry outlook like right now? In 2020 most companies really jammed on the brakes and so many of our signage projects were halted. 2021 was a year of reassessment and restarts. 2022 looks to be a strong year of growth in the construction industry. We aren't out of the woods yet, but there is definitely light at the end of the tunnel.

What does the future hold for Priority Architectural Graphics? We are excited for continued growth in the construction industry as our region reemerges from Covid. With our acquisition of VKK, we are expanding our footprint in Silicon Valley and focusing on making increasing inroads into client work from the technology, life sciences and health care sectors. As I travel locally, I'm so proud that our work can be seen all over the region from San Francisco International Airport to Golden Gate Park, and BART stations to company headquarters like Gilead, Intel and eBay.

I'm really looking forward to staying laser focused on great client service, continuing to execute on our strategic growth initiatives, but first and foremost, building the team at Priority. We're in a people-centric business and that's really what I love most.

Brooke Strickland is a Vancouver, Washington-based freelance writer.