



# **Experiences of Womanhood in Business Consulting and Web Design**

**Entrepreneur, Emily Lonigro**

This case was written by Professor Amanda Bullough and her graduate student, Aynsley Dunham, at the University of Delaware. It is intended to be used as the basis of class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from published sources and interviews with the business leader.

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## **Abstract**

This case examines the effects of gender on women's careers and the balancing act that women negotiate with their husbands to grow their businesses. It mainly focuses on societal expectations of mothers and gender discrimination in majority-male career fields. These are explored through the story of a female business owner, Emily Lonigro. Also discussed are her methods of handling gender-related adversity and how she navigated economic problems that threatened her company.

## **Learning Outcomes**

- Identify ways that societal expectations of women can affect their careers and the added challenges of working in a male-dominated industry.
- Appreciate strategies for how women and men can balance their careers and parenthood.
- Understand the importance of diversifying one's business in multiple ways to reduce risk and increase success.

## **Leadership Challenge**

Emily Lonigro sighed as she hit "send" on yet another work email. It was late, and she knew she had another busy day ahead of her tomorrow. A glance at her calendar confirmed the numerous meetings, calls, and deadlines that made up a typical day for the founder and owner of LimeRed Studios. Emily still had work to do before she could finally rest for the night, but it was time for a break.

As she sipped from a glass of water in her kitchen, Emily's mind ran through the tasks she would need to finish before bed in preparation for tomorrow. Her days were busy, but the bustle filled Emily with satisfaction: This was a sign of how far she had come and how much adversity she had overcome to be here.

The smile on her face fell as Emily remembered the challenges she had faced in the early years of her business. LimeRed Studios was founded to help companies with web design, naming, branding, and other marketing services. (LimeRed, n.d.) As a web designer, Emily had struggled to be taken seriously, first as a woman and later as a mother. Then, Emily struggled to balance her roles as a parent and a business owner. It took time, but Emily established herself, found success for her company, and discovered a work-life balance that worked for her. Staring into her glass, Emily reflected on the challenges she faced. How had she solved the challenges of her past? Were there better solutions? What challenges might she face going forward, and how should she respond?



## Founding LimeRed Studios

LimeRed Studios began in 2004 with Emily's freelance work in web design, inspired by her desire to do work that helped people. From 2004 to 2008, she worked in New York City doing freelance work, and from 2006 to 2008, Emily also worked as an Art Director and VP of Client Services for 400twin, a market research and consulting company. (Lonigro, n.d.) In 2008 Emily relocated to Chicago and continued her freelance work, cultivating a client base of nonprofits and small businesses. After five years, Emily's client base had grown so large that she needed to hire staff to keep up, and LimeRed Studios was born.

LimeRed Studios is a branding and web design agency "committed to working with people who create meaningful positive change." (LimeRed, n.d.) As part of this commitment, LimeRed is a certified B-Corporation. B-Corporations are for-profit businesses that use their income and influence to create an inclusive economy that enables employees to lead better lives, protect the environment, minimize their environmental impact, and be financially transparent. To become certified, these companies must enshrine these values in their governing documents and company policies, making them legally accountable for making ethical choices. Businesses are certified when they pass an assessment by the certifying body that the company has the appropriate written documents and acts according to the values espoused. (B Lab, n.d.) For LimeRed, this manifests in several ways. First, LimeRed's clients are primarily non-profits, higher education institutions, and companies dedicated to corporate social responsibility. As much as possible, LimeRed also partners with vendors that share its mission. LimeRed offers a host of programs and resources to the community and encourages its employees to volunteer. Staff diversity is also valued, and LimeRed is committed to hiring regardless of race, age, gender, or other factors. (LimeRed, n.d.)

## Difficulties with Gender Bias

Although Emily (and LimeRed Studios by extension) has been successful, the road to success was bumpy. Web design and business consulting are both male-dominated fields, with men comprising nearly 62% of web designers and 61% of business consultants. (Consultiful, n.d. & Hilder, 2020) Many networking and business events Emily attended had only a handful of women in attendance, and there were even times she was the only woman there. It quickly became apparent that she was not only a gender minority in her fields but that her interactions with her peers were negatively impacted based on her gender.

When other professionals looked at Emily, they saw a woman. And because they saw a woman, they made assumptions about her career field, how successful she and her business were, and her dedication to her business. On a purely superficial level, Emily found that people



tended to underestimate her if she did not cultivate the “right” appearance. She looked younger than her age, so she had to be careful to style her hair in ways that made her look more “mature” to garner the respect of others. When she told others she did design work, many assumed that Emily was an interior designer rather than a web designer. (The interior design field is 70% female.) (Contract, 2020) Even once corrected, she needed to stress that she did very technical work on web pages as if she needed to prove to her colleagues that she, a woman, was indeed capable of performing programming work.

Similarly, Emily found herself forced to defend her dedication to her business and her career. She was not treated as a serious businessperson, even if her business was more profitable or significant than a male colleague's. People likewise assumed that LimeRed Studios was a hobby or game rather than her livelihood and said condescending things to her: One man went so far as to say that it was “cute that she ran a business.” During her pregnancy, people acted dismissively toward her and implied that she would stop working to care for her children.

Emily knew she was fielding questions that would not be asked if she were a man. People did not question a man's dedication to his career, ignore his successes, or assume he would give up his work to be a caregiver. As her business grew and her network grew, she decided enough was enough and began to prune her business connections and activities. Rather than associating with people who did not support her, she kept up with connections that supported her. She now meets monthly with other women who run B-Corporations for them to discuss business problems and solve them together. She has also participated in business leadership programs for small business owners to hone her skills and help grow her business. (Goldman Sachs, n.d.)

Although it took time and was a significant step, surrounding herself with a supportive network was the right move for her. It allowed Emily to grow as a businesswoman through training and discourses with people who believe in her abilities as a leader and the potential of her company. But unfortunately, there was another genuine challenge she had also faced: Finding the balance between motherhood and her career.



## Motherhood

Unlike people had assumed, Emily had no intention of giving up her business for motherhood: She was determined to find a way to handle both. When she had her first child in early 2013, she planned to have one of her employees handle the day-to-day tasks in the office while she stayed home with her child and brought in new business. However, as a first-time parent, Emily underestimated the difficulty of caring for an infant and struggled to stay on top of things. She was so focused on meeting her commitments on top of childcare that she did not have the time to bring in new business. Then, an Illinois state budget crisis eliminated much of LimeRed's business.

The recession of 2009 hit Illinois hard. Over 400,000 people lost their jobs two years after the recession began, and the state's revenues were reduced by \$15 billion from 2007 to 2010 while the state's costs increased. In 2011, Illinois increased its flat-rate income tax by 66% to help cover the shortfall, but this did not address the systemic issues that contributed to the crisis. A particularly significant problem was that unfunded pension liabilities grew 675% from 1996 to 2016, diverting a large portion of the state budget to cover pensions. (Ramos, 2017) The result was that the state government was looking to cut spending, and many of LimeRed's customers were affected. Medical centers and higher education institutes had their budgets slashed, and some even went out of business. To adapt to these new budget constraints, the organizations began to cut back on spending—and LimeRed's services were some of the first to go.

By the fall of 2014, Emily knew she needed to change. LimeRed Studios was struggling with reduced cash flows. If she failed to make the right choices to navigate the company through this dark time, she knew it would go under; but to make those choices, she needed to be more available to act as the CEO. With that in mind, Emily sat down with her husband to discuss alternative arrangements for childcare to allow her to work. Ultimately, the couple decided that her husband would become a freelancer to spend more time caring for their daughter and to hire a nanny for additional help and support.

With more of her time freed up, Emily could refocus her energies on saving LimeRed. The Illinois budget crisis had taught her two essential things: First, that diversification in clientele was necessary, and second, that regional diversification was just as essential. If LimeRed had fewer clients in the public sector, they would be less affected by political issues. Likewise, if they had clients from different regions of the country, they would not need to worry about political issues in one state affecting their business in others.

With these lessons in mind, Emily worked to diversify LimeRed's client base. Unfortunately, it was not an instant fix. The company did poorly in 2013 and 2014, with Emily using her



savings to pay her employees and keep the company going. Fortunately, things turned around in 2015, and LimeRed Studios stabilized and became profitable again.

When her second child was born in the fall of 2015, Emily felt ready to handle not only the demands of another baby but any crisis that came LimeRed's way. She had developed a way to lessen the weight of childcare on herself so that she could balance being a business owner and a parent. She had learned the best ways to bring in new work for her company to keep it profitable. Overall, she felt stronger for having overcome the challenges set before her—and ready to charge forward no matter what.

### **LimeRed Studios Today**

As of February 2021, LimeRed Studios is still in business. Services offered by the company include branding, communication design, service and curriculum design, web design, and naming. LimeRed Studios' client base now includes higher education institutions, and they now work with companies on corporate social responsibility. It is a Certified Woman-Owned Business as of 2011. In 2014 it became a Certified B-Corporation, which designates that the company is dedicated to social responsibility. In addition, DesignRush has named it a Best Graphic Design Company and one of the best branding agencies in Chicago. (LimeRed, n.d.)



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