



MEMBER OF THE M&T FAMILY

# The Power of the Pack:

## How some women business owners are surviving and thriving during uniquely challenging times

**Janet Wischnia**

Thomaston Mills

**Emily Bittenbender**

Bittenbender Construction

**Angela McCaffery**

Bittenbender Construction

**Desyree Dixon**

Bolton Therapy & Wellness

**Lisa Robinson**

Bolton Therapy & Wellness

**Susan Kerber**

Rad Soap



## Thomaston Mills is one of the largest manufacturers of bed linens in the U.S.



**The COVID-19 crisis has challenged their business. It also provided unexpected opportunities for growth.**

**Janet Wischnia**  
**Owner | Thomaston Mills**

We're a family business. The business was started by my grandfather and grown by my father and his brothers. Now it's run by myself and two of my cousins. We're really in three different types of businesses.

On the government side, things seem to be going pretty well throughout this. We sell bedding as well as other textile products to government agencies all across the United States.

Our hospitality business is a little bit different, with hotels closing off all over the world: That business is not doing so good at the moment.

Our health care business, things are doing much better. We had sales from hospitals and we had a sale from Walter Reed.

**With the shortage of medical gowns and masks Thomaston Mills was able to pivot in response to the pandemic.**

The cloth that's used to make masks and some gowns is very similar to the cloth that we use to make our bedding. So we have been able to change direction and have been selling cloth to people that are making masks. Also, we have been developing our own cloth to sell to people who are making gowns.

The last couple weeks I've been working with technical people to develop it and we are very, very close to having this done.

We think that is going to be really helpful obviously to workers, and to our business.

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**Last year the company decided to start a retail website. That forward thinking allowed them to capitalize on a changing marketplace.**

Previously, we had been strictly in the B2B business, but with the attention being paid to American-made products, we thought we might give a try at starting a retail brand.

I know about how to produce sheets and make sheets, but nothing about retail marketing and I just started to [LAUGH] learn all about these things. And the website went live, and it was growing very slowly last year, but in the past couple of months we have really seen a tremendous growth in that part of our business.

I'm getting more and more emails from people saying thank you for making products here—thank you for bringing textiles back to the United States. Those emails have been what is getting me through all of this. It's very heartwarming.

**As the banker for Thomaston, M&T helped them navigate the economic uncertainties created by the pandemic.**

We've been with M&T and Wilmington Trust for just about a year now. We are so happy that we changed from our other bank. Because when this whole thing occurred, our relationship manager was just tremendous in helping us get through this whole PPE loan debt. He was emailing us at all hours of the night and day until this whole thing was done. So thank you for that.

**To learn more about Thomaston Mills visit [thomastonmills.com](https://thomastonmills.com).**

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## Bittenbender Construction is a 100% women-owned and operated business



**Networking has been key to their growth and success.**

**Emily Bittenbender**  
**Managing Partner | Bittenbender Construction**

**Angela McCaffery**  
**Chief Operating Officer | Bittenbender Construction**

**EMILY:** We are definitely women in an all male-dominated industry and we have definitely built our networks and relationships amongst our male counterparts. All of our competitors are male-owned and operated, and many of whom have been in business for several generations.

**ANGELA:** There's very few, I think, really well-oiled structured women networks that function at the level of what the traditional business community does. So we're kinda trying to play catch up there. But it's also been our observance that women, they struggle to find and leverage within their networks.

**Women entrepreneurs are often disadvantaged by being excluded from long-established networks.**

We always tell our mentees that they really have to begin networking early, with men and women; try not to make it such a woman thing. But just really network early in their careers and grow that peer group because you never know where you're going to end up.

**EMILY:** The two main networks that we operate in, the construction industry and the business community, they're really formally established and very structured early in our country's history, by men since our founding fathers.

But in this network, we're definitely accepted and trusted and treated as a 100% equal partner, and a brother. This took many years for us to establish, but we had to basically earn their trust to get that seat at the table.

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**ANGELA:** People always ask, well, how do you get your voice and how do you become part of the boys club, or how do you gain acceptance that way?

We really just focused on being a competitor and not so much hyperfocusing on the gender role at that time. It's obviously there, but try not to really make it about that so much and just really be due as an equal partner.

**Bittenbender has a long-standing relationship with M&T and Wilmington Trust. It's a partnership that has helped them grow and weather economic uncertainty since they opened their doors in 2003.**

**EMILY:** Angela and I, our number one concern is to care for our employees. And honestly, you guys helped us give our employees their most security during COVID, and we never took our employees off our payroll. We kept everybody on full-time, really believing that M&T was going to help us get the PPT.

**ANGELA:** M&T has been phenomenal. I mean, they were on the phone with me daily, and Emily, and we were talking through all of this and kind of navigating these uncertain waters.

**Networks offer more than just capital, they open doors to technology, knowledge, and advice.**

**EMILY:** I found that our competitors and our colleagues were super supportive; it was like this tremendous bonding opportunity. We really kind of shared information together.

And men, they like to talk about what they're doing. Especially if they have an idea that they think is good. And I think that women, if we can just act a little bit more like that sometimes, and that confidence, even if we're wrong, men don't really care. They're confident enough to share.

So it was fun. And it was a good experience, though a nerve-wracking one to say the least. But we really supported each other.

**To learn more about Bittenbender Construction visit [bittenbenderconstruction.com](https://bittenbenderconstruction.com).**

## Bolton Therapy and Wellness built a community-centered business focused on in-person client meetings



**COVID-19 forced them to rethink their strategy.**

**Desyree Dixon, LCSW-C**  
**Co-Owner | Bolton Therapy & Wellness**

**Lisa Robinson**  
**Manager | Bolton Therapy & Wellness**

We first had to figure out how to stabilize the business. So right as COVID hit and we couldn't have in-person sessions anymore with clients, the first thing we had to do was figure out how to get online and to continue to provide the service virtually.

The second piece of it was we were in the middle of our biggest growth plan. At the end of last year, we did really well. And so we decided to expand and we outlined a renovation of nearly \$100,000. We were in the middle of the renovation and COVID hit. We panicked and were like, "my goodness, what do we do now? We've got contracts, do we continue the work? What do we do?"

**The relationship manager at M&T met with Bolton and provided strategic advice to help them move forward.**

That meeting was an absolute godsend. Because it was with her help that we were able to get the courage and the peace of mind to continue with the renovation. So she called us weekly, talked to us about strategies and things that they would continue to do to support us financially.

Not just M&T, she called to let us know about state, federal, and local grant loan relief programs that we could take advantage of. And that just gave us comfort. We knew that we were going to be okay.



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**The unprecedented situation created by COVID-19 also presented Bowen with new business opportunities.**

In February of this year, the Baltimore City Council unanimously passed the Elijah Cummings Healing City Act, which has an incredible focus on healing and addressing trauma in the city's children. We saw that as an amazing opportunity for Bolton Therapy because our business is situated right in Baltimore City. We're already targeting the population. We're a community business that services the community and we specialize in trauma.

So we're pivoting to address the great need that we think will be there for mental health services.

**Getting to a new normal.**

I think that we've tried to focus on three things that any business, regardless of the space that you're operating in, can work and address at this time.

The first was maintaining as much of your current business as you possibly can. The second is to think about ways that you can be flexible because even though we're thinking day-to-day, week-to-week right now, we still are businesses that have shorter-term plans and longer-term plans.

And finally, use this as an opportunity to seek out new business and to try to figure out what are services and products that maybe weren't needed before, that are now really needed? And how can you adapt your business to be responsive to those needs?

**To learn more about Bolton Therapy visit [boltontherapy.com](https://boltontherapy.com).**

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## It all began in a small kitchen fueled by a mother's love where founder, Sue Kerber, searched for something natural to relieve her son's eczema



**Sue Kerber started Rad Soap in her kitchen with a plan to sell the homemade lotions she had developed to help her son's illness.**

**Susan Kerber  
Founder | Rad Soap**

In the beginning, it was me just stirring up little things to help my son's eczema, and that's how this whole thing started.

My son had eczema very bad, and I didn't have a doctor that I trusted. Every time we put stuff on him, it would hurt.

I think as mothers, of course, we just want to solve the problem, so I started making my own stuff and just continued doing that throughout this whole process.

**Sue's family helped her develop a business plan to produce body care "products with purpose." Today both her sons are partners in the company.**

My boys both helped me out a lot. We all have different aspects of the business, so it's working together and you remove your "being a mother." [LAUGH]

I think we all think in the same vein, we're all very cautious of what we do, and we all have our different area to go in.

**For most owners, business is a family affair and 79% say their business is family run.**

We make sure that our decisions are made not out of ego. A lot of businesses and families, you know you are the eldest and you make all the decisions. I try and make a solution to whatever problems come up and work with their strengths and my strengths.

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During this time, during the corona, we have really had to take our employees and customers fears, and try to make everyone feel safe. We try and use things that add an extra caution.

You have to work together to solve these problems and we just work well together. It really is a nice family business.

To learn more about RAD Soap visit [radsoap.com](https://radsoap.com).

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