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eNEWSLETTER

SUCCESS SECRET:
"Winning is an
attitude, an attitude in
all you do."
*Rita Benson LeBlanc,
Owner/EVP, New
Orleans Saints*



Sales and Storms

By Leigh Henderson

Rita Benson LeBlanc, owner/EVP, New Orleans Saints, talks about life after Katrina

Rita Benson LeBlanc was eight when her grandfather Tom Benson assumed ownership of the Saints. Today – 21 years later – as owner and EVP of the New Orleans Saints football team, LeBlanc's responsibilities for marketing and business operations include creating the revenue to pay the multimillion-dollar contracts for the 99 players on the team. Yet, the role seems to weigh lightly on her shoulders, perhaps because the word "collaborate" pops up many times in conversations.

Benson LeBlanc tells PINK about preparing for and recovering from disasters including Hurricane Katrina, the reason for the Saints' 2006 record season ticket sales – and her future in football.

PINK: To what do you attribute your record season ticket sales in 2006?

RBLB: New Orleanians are celebrating what it means to love the city, and for many people their greatest love is Saints football. You can relieve a lot of stress at a Saints game. Also, we made good decisions in the offseason with acquiring Head Coach Sean Payton, quarterback Drew Brees and rookie Reggie Bush.

PINK: What is the most innovative thing you have done to drive revenue?

RBLB: From a ticket sales standpoint, we dramatically restructured our pricing based on a logical supply and demand evaluation. This actually meant raising prices in some areas while cutting prices in other seating sections. Great seats are valued high, but we have seats as low as \$14 per game so that anyone hit hard by the storm could afford a season ticket.

PINK: Did you know as a child that you'd one day work in your grandfather's business?

RBLB: I was always fascinated by the family businesses. I'd wander around absorbing all the comings and goings. After several internships, I realized the team was the business I saw the greatest opportunities with.

PINK: Does a woman in a top sports management position bring anything different to the table than a man would?

RBLB: I empathize with every level of employee in the office. I don't need to have a conversation to gather that a person is under too much stress or that we need to share the work load during various stages of the season. Our work is year-round and I have to make certain that our people are living their lives as well as going to work.

PINK: In what ways do you think women playing sports helps them to be more successful and accepted at the top ranks of business?

RBLB: I don't look for jocks in sports management. I look for people who will be assets to our company and who will be dedicated to their role in the organization.

PINK: How did Hurricane Katrina affect you?

RBLB: I got a free ticket to Stressville. Seriously, it has been the most challenging and the most rewarding year of my life. I was very fortunate not to have had a flooded home, but I did have to deal with damages, my insurance agent quitting his company before completing my claim, and a number of setbacks we all faced while rebuilding our lives.

PINK: What have you learned that would help other business executives prepare for and recover from disasters?

RBLB: Have an action plan. You must have a clear chain of command and responsibilities laid out for your people to follow. Ask yourself, "Who must relocate in order to continue operations?" We had to have key executives in communication in order to plan where we would go, how we could keep our computer systems intact, how we would pay our employees, etc.

PINK: How are you helping the New Orleans community bounce back from the storm?

RBLB: We're offering outdoor activities since so much green space is taken up with FEMA trailers or was destroyed as a public facility for recreation. We're reaching out to schools in Louisiana and Mississippi who were devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita with NFL grant money towards equipment, uniforms, helmets, etc. We have a program with Loyola University to get students involved with the youth events held at our practice facility near our headquarters in Metairie.

PINK: Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Does the title Commissioner of the National Football League factor into your future?

RBLB: In 10 years, I'm owning and operating a Super Bowl championship team. Male or female in the NFL, we all want that championship ring. Commissioner? When you run a team, you don't think about running them all. The owners are the bosses; the commissioner keeps everyone on the same page. I prefer owner to commissioner.

PINK: How would you define a great leader?

RBLB: A great leader knows how to inspire and encourage people to reach their greatest potential. Some days my greatest thrill is when I listen to someone, encourage them and make them feel better. They breathe easier and they are happier people. Let's face it, we have all been deflated or let down by a negative miserable person; if you are positive you help increase the energy around you.

PINK: What's your approach to managing your staff – especially when some may have suffered terrible losses in the aftermath of Katrina?

RBLB: After the storm, we put our people and their families up in a hotel for up to a month. They received stipends and when we moved the office back to our Metairie location, we gave them a week to handle their own affairs. We held sessions where we brought in contacts from schools, banks and insurance companies.

PINK: What is your professional success secret?

RBLB: Patience, perspective and compassion. But, I still boil it all down to rules, fairness and the health of the business being in the forefront of every decision. Katrina was an incredible test for us all. I had friends who endangered their businesses by paying their employees when they had no revenue coming in. We were lucky; we could operate in multiple stadiums and continue on.

PINK: What advice can you give to our readers that you've found helpful in your own career?

RBLB: Be self aware. What do you want to convey about yourself? Where do you want to go? Think about the people who can open the doors to get you there and what kind of employee they want. I'm always evaluating why I have this job. Am I fulfilled and challenged by what I do? Because the day you're not happy is the day you realize you should look for a change in life.