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## Forces of Change: Designing women

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## Designing woman

**Twice a year Susan Beatenbough Poletti** sits down with a piece of yellow lined paper and sets goals for her life.

She achieved one of her top goals of owning her own business in 1984, but that has only made her work harder to ensure the success of her now multi-million-dollar interior design business.

Poletti, who graduated from Furman in 1977 with a degree in art, is owner and president of Poletti Associates Inc. in Woodside, Calif. A furniture dealership, Poletti Associates Inc. also offers interior design and space planning to corporate and residential clients.

Last year, as it has been several times previously, the company was named one of the top 50 women-owned businesses in Silicon Valley. Its corporate revenue surpassed \$9 million in 2006.

Poletti says she always knew she wanted to do some sort of design work. After Furman, her first foray was into the fashion industry.

"As a teen-ager I kept a journal of pictures from magazines," she says. "That always excited me."

However, she soon learned the fashion industry wasn't her niche. Her next venture was with a residential design firm. Soon Poletti felt right at home helping furnish homes and offices for clients.

"I loved working within a budget and under deadlines," says Poletti. "I thought, 'This is for me.'"

After a year and a half at the company, Poletti was its top salesperson. But one Friday, she walked into her office and learned that commissions had been sliced across the board. She promptly quit, but soon came to see her decision as an opportunity, not a setback.

With two colleagues, Poletti launched a company called Corporate Environments in 1984. She and her partners agreed that they would make the company a priority and would

delay having children for at least three years. When the partners split in 2003, Poletti assumed the helm of the new company.

Poletti says that the greatest appeal of being an entrepreneur is the freedom and challenge of being her own boss. "You never get ahead working for somebody," she says. "But with your own company, the sky is the limit on how much money you can make. If I make a sale, I get money. I'm the one who decides what I'm going to make."

"Entrepreneurs are just driven to do their best and get ahead," she says. "We're not complacent."

A critical key to Poletti's success is her philosophy toward her customers. "The customer is always right, even when they're wrong," she says, noting that positive customer feedback and referrals have played major roles in the success of her business. "Building credibility is the hardest part of a startup. You must prove yourself and become credible."

Poletti has extended that attitude to the way she approaches a design project. When planning a room, she says, her aim is to achieve comfort and versatility.

When she steps back and sees the finished product, there's satisfaction not only for the customer but for Poletti as well. "It's so rewarding to see you've

done something stylish and creative, yet productive," she says.

Poletti, a member of Furman's Advisory Council, describes her undergraduate years as "the perfect experience for me." And although she is now largely focused on the business aspect of the company, her art degree still comes into play.

"It gave me a sense of perspective, color and design, a flair for layouts," she says.

Above all, the intense work Poletti put into her company in its early years has paid off not just in financial success, but in family time as well. With her husband, Paul, and 15-year-old daughter, Mary, she has been able to travel the world — the south of France is a favorite vacation spot. She's also rediscovered a love of painting through volunteer work.

For Poletti, it just goes to show that you never know where your goals can lead you. "I'm happy always knowing that anything is possible," she says.

— JESSICA TAYLOR '07

To learn more, visit [www.polettiassociates.com](http://www.polettiassociates.com).

