

BE! is for women on top of their game

Neli Vazquez-Rowland is definitely not your typical president/CEO of a professional nailcare company. She isn't even the founder. But with her business background and passion for supporting and encouraging women to use their potential and expand their lives' possibilities, she is growing the professional beauty nailcare line with the shortest name—**Be!**—into one that has risen from below the radar screens into a fast growing brand. *Beauty Industry Report* had the opportunity to chat with this very interesting and successful entrepreneur and share our conversation with BIR readers.

Beauty Industry Report (BIR): What are the primary messages that you want to convey to BIR's readers through this interview?

Neli Vazquez-Roland (NV-R): As a beauty conscious woman on the go, I need Be! Nail Lacquer "For Women on Top of Their Game!" Where has it been all my life? The primary message is that we have a very high quality product that performs well and is elegant and "on trend" with a beautiful range of colors. The **2Be! Strengtheners** alone have made a huge difference for those interested in healing and growing their natural nails, for many, after years of acrylics.

The Be! philosophy of "doing well by doing good" has been a guiding principle in my success as an entrepreneur. I have been invited as a panelist and speaker at women's leadership events to talk about being a social entrepreneur by creating programs that help women advance in the world... and people in general that are "off" their game.

As someone who has enjoyed success by overcoming obstacles in life, I derive tremendous joy in helping others find inspiration and dare them to aspire to achieve their heart's desire. Be! "For Women on Top of Their Game!" reminds us to have fun and go for it.

At Be!, we strive to capture our messages with each collection release. "The Power 2Be!" for Fall/Winter 2006 included amazing "on trend" colors and names that inspired women 2Be! their amazing selves. Our 2007 Spring/Summer Collection is called "**Be! Feng**

Shui" with colors that are not only beautiful, but with names that create and radiate the aura of positive energy. We consulted with fashion insiders and a Feng Shui expert to create this unique collection.

I am thrilled that my efforts are being recognized, and I am inspired to know that my platform with Be! resonates with the consumer. For example, this past year, I was a panelist at the **Women's Business Development Center's (WBDC)** 20th Anniversary event in Chicago that attracted a sold-out 3,000 people. **Oprah Winfrey** was the keynote speaker at the event. This year, I am the recipient of an entrepreneurial award called "**Aiming High-A Celebration of the Power of Women**" given by **Legal Momentum**, an organization based in New York with a 36-year history of supporting and championing women.

BIR: Tell me about your background. How did you get to where you are today?

NV-R: I grew up in an immigrant entrepreneurial family, in an at-risk community and was the first in my family of seven to go to college. After graduation, I entered the financial industry, where I worked as a stockbroker for more than 13 years. Although I experienced financial success, I was not experiencing fulfillment in my career.

When a personal family experience with alcoholism and a subsequent setback occurred, my husband and I realized there was a tremendous need for supportive housing for people in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. We decided to diversify our investment portfolio into real estate in the early '90s and to develop supportive housing. Hence, **A Safe Haven L.L.C.** was born in 1994. From the moment we started A Safe Haven, we knew that we were making a difference helping people who had lost all hope. Through supportive housing and programs, A Safe Haven has helped to rebuild lives, reunify families and restore self-esteem to thousands of people who were referred to us from treatment and correctional systems as an alternative to prison terms for non-violent offenses. Today, A Safe Haven has served more than 25,000 people, many of whom are now liv-

ing productive lives, supporting their families and serving as role models to others. In addition to supportive recovery homes, we are involved in job training programs and affordable housing. All of our businesses have evolved from a need to create a continuum of care to ensure long-term success. A Safe Haven is garnering national attention as one of the most successful recovery programs in the country.

BIR: When did you start Be!

NV-R: I was approached by the two founders of Be! to take the business from the incubator stage to the next level as an emerging growth company. I knew the original owners, who together had more than 35 years of industry experience, and championed them as women in business since the beginning. As a discriminating consumer and a woman on the go, I expect performance from my products, and Be! Nail Lacquers and 2Be! Nail Strengtheners were the best products I had ever tried. I thought everyone should know about them. When I was offered the opportunity to own and manage the company, I became intrigued with the idea of not only representing what I consider the best products on the market, but to build it as a lifestyle brand that can be supportive and inspirational to women, too.

BIR: What are your mission and vision?

NV-R: Our mission is two-fold: to serve the fashion-forward "woman on top of her game" with innovative, high quality products and to "do well by doing good." Our mission guides every decision we make. We take our participation in programs to help women and children very seriously.

Our vision is to be a consumer driven professional brand. The greatest compliment that I hear from Be! fans everyday is how wonderful our line is—and especially how well it performs and what a difference it has made to their nails. Beauty starts with the hands. A beautifully manicured hand can give you that extra boost you need to get you through the day. We believe that if you have an inspirational message for a name of color, you will have an affirmation each time you think of the name of the color and it will change and radiate your attitude.



BIR: What is your company's unique selling proposition that gives your brand a sustainable competitive edge?

NV-R: Be! has an elegantly designed bottle, with a product that performs exceptionally well, and is not only beautiful, but it is practical. Be! is a lifestyle brand that helps people tell the world that they are inspirational, aspirational women making a difference!

BIR: Nail lacquer is the backbone of most professional beauty nailcare marketers. Tell me about Be!'s line of nail lacquer products and its patented Duraflow formula?

NV-R: Duraflow is a patented technology that allows for longer lasting manicures (even on natural nails), a high gloss/self-leveling application that looks like glass and is fast drying, so it saves time!

BIR: Please tell BIR's readers about the six 2 Be! nail treatments.

NV-R: We have a nail strengthening system called 2Be!, featuring a range of products, such as **2Be! Flexible**, which is used for treating dry, brittle nails. We also have a product called **2Be! Revived**, which is used for extremely damaged nails. As problem nails heal, our system allows for consumers to eventually wear **2Be! Maintained** for keeping nails healthy and conditioned without over strengthening. Our line of **2Be! Nail Strengtheners** includes a natural ingredient derived from an Asian Herb in Ayurveda Medicine called gotu kola. Our research shows that gotu kola has been used for centuries to help heal skin problems, and the keratinization in the nail is similar to the skin.

BIR: Neli, tell me more about your philosophy of needing a purpose and to make a difference in what you do—especially in your focus on empowering women.

NV-R: I have benefited from opportunities that were given to me early on by individuals who believed in me, even before I believed in myself. When I started in the brokerage industry, there weren't any female role models. I had two options—either give up, or show my gratitude to those who believed in me by succeeding and proving them right, and possibly opening the door to women who followed. The choice was easy. I believe that if we live our lives with good intention and get results, the rewards come. In the big picture, it is about making a positive blip in the universe and leaving a longer

lasting legacy in the lives of others.

BIR: You describe Be! as a new "indie" or next generation brand. Tell me more.

NV-R: First, we are new. We are "indie" because we are a little edgier and independently owned. And, we are considered "next generation" because not only do we have innovative products, but we are also evolutionary in business, as the idea of social responsibility is intertwined with our core business philosophy and not a byproduct of our success.

BIR: What is your company's greatest accomplishment to date?

NV-R: I consider the brand to have relaunched under my tenure of exactly one year. Our accomplishments have exceeded our expectations. Be! has garnered praise and beauty editors' choice awards from all beauty industry and consumers beauty editors:

- 2007 2Be! is *NYC Shecky's* Beauty Editors' Choice Award Winner.
- 2006 *Nails Magazine* featured 2Be! on its list of "What is Hot in Specialized Treatments."
- 2006 *NailPro* featured Be!'s philosophy and the WBDC event with Oprah Winfrey in a "Girl Power" article.
- 2006 Featured as "Best in Show" Product at the **Chicago Midwest Beauty Show**.
- 2006 Be! featured on *Pretty City's* "Love It" List.

In addition, we launched Be! in seven countries in Eastern Europe, including Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Belarus, and at this writing, we are expanding distribution to Canada and Western Europe. What is noteworthy to us is that we are being found through the gift of "word of mouth" recommendations by consumers and industry professionals as a hot new quality brand in nailcare.

BIR: Who are the key members of your management team?

NV-R: **Mike Kirk**, CFO; **Chris Eaton**, sales manager; **Erica Guzman**, distribution manager; **Diana Nguyen**, IT Manager and an amazing support staff. Our distributors are also a key sales force for Be!

BIR: At your company, what role do salon trade and distributor shows have?

NV-R: The role of shows is expanding. We have participated at **CosmoProf**, the **Chicago Midwest Beauty Show**, **Premiere Orlando** and **The Intercharm and World Trade**

Shows—the two largest trade shows in Eastern Europe.

BIR: What is your company's ecommerce initiative?

NV-R: The e-commerce site was created and developed from a need to meet the demand in markets where we do not have distributors. Be! Blast, a monthly e-newsletter, was also created to help beauty professionals and consumers learn about our latest news, charity/fashion events, useful nailcare info, feature articles, promotions and collections as they happen. (It saves trees, too!) It has turned out to be an excellent tool for Be! We do our best to direct traffic to our spa/salons partners, to local distributors and to promote the nail tech industry.

BIR: Who is your target market?

NV-R: We currently sell to distributors and direct to salons/spas in markets where we do not have a distributor. We have some smaller boutique salon chains as customers and we are starting to receive calls from more beauty schools. Students are savvy about brands. They research what is new and exciting. They want a product that can help differentiate themselves and build their careers through client satisfaction, retention and referrals. The younger generation is also more likely to try new products and identify with products that represent their beliefs. That is another reason why we consider ourselves a "next generation" line.

BIR: How many distributors are in your U.S. network?

NV-R: We have five distributors in the United States. When I got involved with the company, we had some attrition. The good news from the initial fallout is that we moved forward and secured some very solid partners both nationally and internationally with an unwavering commitment to the Be! brand.

BIR: Describe your ideal distributor.

NV-R: The ideal Be! distributor is very selective and strategic in the product lines that it offers. We are interested in distributors that are entrepreneurial, excited about the industry and are passionate about the Be! line and are willing to commit to helping not only build and spread the philosophy, but also protect the integrity of the brand.

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