

By Sheila Marikar

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Female entrepreneurs have long known how hard it is to raise money from a roomful of men. “I would walk into these rooms of late-40s, early-50s dudes — potential investors — and they would just look at me blankly, like, ‘I do not get it,’” said Rachel Drori, the founder of Daily Harvest, a delivery service for produce-centric meals. “Sometimes, they’d say, ‘Can you send samples to my wife?’”

What if Ms. Drori, and others like her, could pitch to a roomful of women?

On a frigid evening in January, some 275 entrepreneurs filed into the SoHo outpost of The Wing, the women-only co-working club, for a women-only pitch night. They grabbed seats (pink folding chairs, mint settees, maroon couches) as well as sustenance (crudités, cheese, wine) ahead of the main event: Ten start-ups would present their business propositions to potential investors as well as those interested in learning from or working with them.

The gathering was called Wingable, named for the club and Able Partners, a New York venture capital firm that had already put money into each of the 10 companies. The fund, which was started three years ago by Lisa Blau and Amanda Eilian, has been an early-stage investor in a number of female-founded companies, including The Wing and Goop.

Prior to the event, the start-ups spent six weeks in an Able incubator program, honing their business models and pitch decks. “We’re calling it the anti-‘Shark Tank’ because everyone is already a winner,” Ms. Blau said. “They’re getting funding from Able, and we’re just trying to bring more female investors to their cap table.”

“I don’t even care about the harassment,” said Bea Arthur, a start-up entrepreneur, about dealing with male venture capitalists. “It’s just like, if you’re not going to invest, then you’re just wasting my time and trying to hit on me on top of it.” Desiree Rios for The New York Times

“The problem, quite honestly, was people like me, sitting on the sidelines, doing philanthropy, retired from my Wall Street career and not thinking about it,” Ms. Roberts added. “I spend a good chunk of time just trying to get more women focused. All they need is a bit of a lesson, contacts and then they need to come to amazing things like this. This is a free look at companies.”

Liz Lange, the maternity fashion pioneer, tapped Ms. Roberts’s shoulder to say hi; Jennifer Fleiss, the co-founder of Rent the Runway, slid into a seat in front of them.

“Guys would never do an event like this,” Ms. Roberts said. “And the food would suck and it would not be this well organized, and the egos: You might have to leave, you’d have to go outside and get a breath of fresh air. We don’t have to play golf or poker in order to get together and get business done.”

‘You have an amazing company, but I think I might want to date you’

Ms. Blau, 43, and Ms. Eilian, 41, met in 2004, when the former was about to graduate from Harvard Business School and the latter was preparing to begin her first year there. In 2007, Ms. Blau started VitalJuice, a newsletter about healthy living, and Ms. Eilian started Videolicious, a platform for making high-end video. She went through five rounds of fundraising, some while pregnant.

“There’s nothing like being a pregnant woman in the tech world to make you feel like an alien,” Ms. Eilian said.

She and Ms. Blau wondered about the struggles of female founders who didn’t graduate from an elite business school or have a well-pedigreed social network. (Ms. Blau’s husband is the chief executive of Related Companies, the mega-developer, and Ms. Eilian’s husband was an early employee at the private equity firm Starwood Capital Group.) They formed Able in 2016 to invest their own money — they have no outside capital — in early-stage companies led by women.

Flori Marquez, the founder of BlockFi, making her pitch. Last year, female founders received only 2.2 percent of the \$130 billion in venture money invested in the United States.

Desiree Rios for The New York Times

When Zofia Moreno, a founder of the probiotic drink Oba, stumbled on her lines midway through her script, Bea Arthur, who started an on-demand therapy service called the Difference, yelled, “You’re doing great, it’s O.K.!”

Others practiced punch lines and sound bites designed for Twitter. “Our equipment is not barbells and treadmills; it’s wine and Kleenex,” said Shannon McLay, 40, who has started a chain of financial coaching centers called Financial Gym.

Other companies included BlockFi, which provides banking services for investors in cryptocurrency, and AcadeMe, a platform that teaches women workplace skills like how to negotiate a salary increase. The only men in the room were kitchen staff and a guy named Evan who kept his head down and clicked slides on a laptop hooked up to a projector.

Over a lunch of cabbage salad, falafel bowls and sweet potato tacos, the participants talked about dealing with male investors. “This investor once told me, ‘I’m too good-looking to be accused of harassment,’” said Viveka Hulyalkar, 26, the co-founder of Beam, a charitable donation service.

Flori Marquez, the founder of BlockFi, making her pitch. Last year, female founders received only 2.2 percent of the \$130 billion in venture money invested in the United States.

Desiree Rios for The New York Times

“I don’t even care about the harassment,” said Ms. Arthur, 35. “It’s just like, if you’re not going to invest, then you’re just wasting my time and trying to hit on me on top of it.”

“Last year, when I was raising my seed, this guy was like, ‘It must be really difficult for you to raise money, Shannon, because men dissociate intelligence from attractiveness,’” Ms. McLay said. Everyone in earshot groaned.

Correction: March 4, 2019

An earlier version of this article misidentified the role that Amanda Eilian’s husband played at Starwood Capital Group. He was an early employee; he was not a founder of the firm.

Correction: March 5, 2019

An earlier version of this article misidentified the flavors of e-cigarette cartridges that Juul sells. They include fruit flavors, not candy flavors. The article also misidentified the source of a \$12.8 billion investment the company received. It was from Altria, not venture capitalists.

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