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Top of the line

Agar Supply
 named one of
 the top five
 women-led
 companies in
 the state

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TAUNTON — Karen Bressler doesn't mind if men are from Mars and women from Venus, just as long as they work together toward a common goal.

"At the end of the day it comes down to hard work and tenacity," said Bressler, chief executive officer of Agar Supply, Inc., the largest independent food service company in New England.

Bressler's company, according to a recently released research study conducted by Babson College and The Commonwealth Institute using revenue as a criterion, was the fourth of the top five women-led businesses in Massachusetts.



Gazette photo by MIKE GAY

Karen Bressler is the CEO of Agar Supply, Inc. The company, located in the Myles Standish Industrial Park, is the largest independent food service company in New England. It was recently named one of the top five women-led businesses in the state.

This was the second year 100 woman-led businesses in the state generated more than \$6.5 billion in sales, a 38 percent increase over 2000; productivity rate for these businesses based on were that in 2002: the top

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daughter of the man who started the company in 1940 on Clinton Street in Boston's old meat district.

She said she took up an offer from her father (who also used to run Agar) in 1992 to join the company after having worked for an import-export company. She learned the ins and outs of the business and two years ago advanced to CEO.

She puts annual sales at around \$350 million. Bressler said she's lucky she's part of a growing, family-run company. Otherwise, she said, she may not have had the chance to ascend to the top position.

"It's still not an equal playing field for women [in the corporate world]. Some of that old-boy attitude still exists," said Bressler. "Joining a family-run business gave me a much better chance of leading an interesting life."

Being third-generation, she said, has given her the advantage to discover what works best for her and the company.

"We go slow and steady. We're conservative in decision making, but not afraid

to take risks," she said. "But we don't make snap decisions."

Bressler believes that women in positions of power, on a whole, handle things differently than men.

"Women take a different approach," she said. "There's no yelling, screaming or pounding my fist on the table. It's not my style — but I get things done."

Women, she said, tend to be "fixers." "I like fixing things," said Bressler. "It's all part of having a different style, which I think is an advantage in today's business environment."

"That's a huge factor," she said. "I love to get four people in a room and get different opinions. It's not my way or the highway."

Agar moved into the city's industrial park in 2000. It was the fifth move for the company, she said, but the first one outside of Boston, and an important one in terms of growth.

"It was no small task moving 30 miles," Bressler said. "We lost a lot of good people who had worked for us. But we ran out of room

in Boston."

She said she left behind a number of pick-up businesses, which she described as being predominantly Chinese restaurants.

Chinese restaurants, as well as other Asian restaurants, are still a "huge part" of Agar's business. Eight of her outside sales personnel speak Chinese and English.

Agar's client list includes Papa Gino's pizza shops and the Roche Brothers and Trucchi's supermarket chains. All of its business is within New England and covers all six states.

Bressler said the company has traditionally delivered meat, poultry and seafood but has moved into more broad-line food service products such as flour, sugar and other grocery items.

The issue of being a woman in a powerful business position is one that doesn't necessarily intrigue or impede her.

"It's too bad it's even an issue anymore," said Bressler, who still lives in Boston and has a teenage daughter. "For me it's more about just being a person in a business situation."