

Sue Linja

Ownership with Impact

Born and raised in Council, Idaho, Sue Linja always knew she wanted to do something big. She found something big in nutrition. Today, Sue and her business partner, Maureen Sykes, own S&S Nutrition Network, Inc., a nutrition consulting firm with a footprint encompassing nearly 250 contracts with assisted living and nursing home facilities spanning nine states. And Sue estimates they have provided care to hundreds of thousands of people over their twenty plus years of history. Just as important to Sue, S&S Nutrition employs an all-female staff of dietitians, affording them a flexible and rewarding career path.



Motivation for Doing More

Sue grew up as the youngest of six children. “I always had aspirations to go someplace else, grow up and move away, but I loved Council. I mean, life wasn’t easy. There was always a lot of hard work to be done, and each of us had to do our fair share.”

She explains, “We always had cattle and chickens, sometimes pigs, so there was always a lot of work to do. My dad was not a soft and warm and cuddly person; he was always after us to get on track, but it was a nice balance

because my mom was soft and would let us get away with murder. It was a good mix.”

Her family grew up poor. “My dad had a job and, as far as Council goes, it was considered a good paying job. But there were six kids, and my parents didn’t invest their money well. My dad drank and gambled. Two or three years before he would have been able to retire, he decided to start his own business. He quit his job, and he and my uncle started a post and pole business where they

cut down trees and turned them into fences. My poor brothers were always working hard to try to make the business work, but it didn’t turn out so well. The business closed about the time I went off to college.”

The name of her father’s company was S&S Post and Pole. Sue laughs as she remembers when she and Maureen had to come up with a name for their nutrition business, and Sue suggested S&S. “It was almost tongue in cheek, but I said ‘we can always do S&S Nutrition.’ My siblings thought I was crazy,

telling me it was a bad omen, but I just figured I’d have a successful S&S business rather than an unsuccessful one.”

Sue says growing up in a small town and witnessing her father’s business missteps motivated her to pursue a very different path. “It’s almost like I learned what not to do. I wanted to get out of the small-town view and see more, do more.”

She says it was her mom who empowered her to make her dreams of ‘doing more’ come true. “My mom was the biggest cheerleader in the whole wide world. I probably got the best of her because I was the last one at home. She always told me ‘You’re smart, you have people skills, you can do anything you like, you can be anything you want. Don’t stay here, go see the world.’” She didn’t have the means to help, but she started building Sue’s confidence when Sue was a young girl.

Sue remembers hearing a story about when she was 5 or 6 years old. “Every night I would say the same prayer from our Catholic prayer book: ‘Thank you God for soft little kittens; Thank you God for candy, boots, and mittens. Thank you for balloons on a string I can hold on my hand; Thank you for things that are pretty to see...’ At the end of the prayer, my mom asked me if there is anything else I wanted to say. As my mom tells it, I said ‘Thank you God for making me so smart and beautiful, too.’ My mom told me that story

over and over. She told everyone. She wasn’t making fun of me, she was reminding me God made me smart and beautiful and I could do anything I wanted. The constant reminder made me who I am.”

Sue’s mother guided her in other ways, too. “My mom’s drive and work ethic were a huge part of my drive and work ethic.” For most of Sue’s growing up years, her mom worked as a stay at home mom. “She was always the first one up in the morning and the last one up at night. She worked so hard providing for us kids. She spent her time cutting heads off chickens and making us something good to eat. Her hard work was an example to me. It’s the same hard work I give to my family and my business.”

Developing a Love for Nutrition

Sue went to college at the University of Idaho and majored in Food, Nutrition, and Dietetics and loved it immediately. “It’s a constantly evolving field. As an industry, we’re learning new things all the time, and it allows us to have an increasingly positive impact.”

She drives home the point with an example. “I was doing my internship at Mercy Medical Center in the late 1980s. My case study was a patient with Celiac Disease. At that time, gluten sensitivity was totally unheard of. It was only the second case of Celiac the center had ever seen. Gluten free food was not available anywhere in the area, so we had to buy everything from one company out in Seattle. It’s astounding when you think about how today probably 25% of the people in Boise have a gluten-free diet. It’s staggering how quickly things have changed.”

New research findings can

cause frustration, too. “Take the study of fat, cholesterol, and eggs. Nobody wants to hear the story of moderation, so the media latches on to individual findings that get blown out of proportion. One study will say ‘eggs are high in cholesterol so you shouldn’t eat more than three a week.’ Then another study will come out and say, ‘it’s not eggs that are causing your cholesterol to rise; it’s saturated fat so you can eat as many eggs as you like.’ Then another study will come back around ‘Well, you shouldn’t eat too many eggs because the cholesterol converted into you know fat and saturated fat liver.’ To most people that sounds like changing science. People start to lose trust.”

The message Sue thinks is most important is that of moderation. There are always mixed messages. Take something like alcohol: If you want to prevent cancer, then you should abstain from alcohol. If you want to avoid heart and brain disease, then periodic drinking can have a little protective effect. Of course, everyone wants to prevent cancer and heart and brain disease, so what do you do? Sue says the answer is moderation. “Monitor your alcohol intake. Don’t drink every day and don’t drink to excess. Drink in moderation. But ‘drink in moderation’ doesn’t make headlines, it’s a boring story. It has to be all or none, or somethings going to kill you or save your life if it’s going to be a real story.”

Frustration and all, Sue has found her niche in nutrition. “I think it’s such a fun profession. I love what I’m doing

so much.”

Building a Partnership

She hadn’t always expected to be a business owner. It was more like business ownership chose her. As Sue explains it, she had a love of the industry, self-confidence, and hard work. But the magic ingredient was opportunity.

“After college, I was working for a company, Beverly Enterprises, that owned six skilled nursing facilities and one hospital. I traveled to each location, from Lewiston to Pocatello as their regional dietician. The company ended up selling to another company out of state, and those six facilities were spun off from the sale. I had a choice: I could either start my own business by contracting with the six remaining facilities or I could go find other work. I was 22 years old at the time, and I just said, ‘You know, I guess I’m going to do this. I took a leap of faith. It just seemed like the right thing to do.’”

Knowing nothing of being a business owner, she dove right in. “I think my first contract might have been handwritten. I didn’t consult an attorney, I just did it. And then I started getting other facilities, and the business grew.”

About two years later, Sue met Maureen, who was working as a dietician at a facility. Sue recalls, “I was pregnant at the time, close to giving birth to my daughter, Sarah, and Maureen had the insight to come ask me if I needed any help. It was perfect timing.”

Initially, Maureen helped Sue under a part-time contract. Before long, Maureen joined as a partner. Five years later, the two incorporated as an LLC. Over time, they took on more consultants and grew their footprint to what it is today.

When asked what drew her to Maureen, Sue says “I liked that

she had the guts to ask me if I needed help and wanted to partner. I was impressed by her work. She was fast and accurate, efficient, she didn't need a lot of direction. Besides that, she had a complimentary skill set. She's strong in the places where I'm weak. It's the perfect partnership, and it came at the perfect time. I'm not one to sit and analyze and look at something on paper, it just made sense. Perfect sense."

Many female business owners want to start their business with a

partner, but few are fortunate to find a perfect a match.

When asked the secret to success, Sue replies, "I think it's tough if you're putting

100% of everything you have on the line. There's always a risk when you're looking for a partner, so you can't feel like you're risking it all. Maureen and I started on a contract basis, but it worked, and it moved along really quickly when we saw we were a good match."

Sue adds, "There's so much truth to finding somebody who compliments your skills. Maureen and I aren't anything alike in the way that we operate, but we have allowed each other to shine in the areas where we shine, which I think is really good and one of the keys to our success."

When Sue and Maureen decided to solidify their partnership, they split the business 50/50. Sue had more experience and had taken more of the risk in starting the venture, but she says 50/50 made sense. "I'm kind of a gambler, and I just thought I wanted to take a chance on her. I also knew if it didn't work, we didn't

have too much on the line. Both Maureen and I had our own clients. We didn't have a big office space or expensive overhead. If it didn't work, we would be okay."

The partnership just fell into place. "I can't remember ever not being on the same page of where our partnership could go. Maureen and I have different approaches. I say yes to everything where she might

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have taken things more slowly. But it didn't take long, and before we knew it, we were at a place where I trusted she would support our growth and she trusted me to make this

business work. We've grown more respect and appreciation for each other with every day of our 23-year business relationship. I wish I could tell you a story about my foresight and how I knew our partnership would work, but I didn't. I just watched how she worked, and I knew, "This girl is solid. She has my back, and I have hers."

The partners made sure to build fun into their business too, something Sue thinks is important. "Not too long ago we went to Hawaii on a yoga retreat. We had our business meetings, but we were also able to reconnect on a different sort of level. We've always built a friendship alongside the partnership. It's advice I would give to anyone thinking about a business partner."

In their 23-year history,

Sue only remembers one argument. "Well, I love to public speak. It has always invigorated me, so I take every opportunity to speak to a room full of people. There was a time when I had committed to give a presentation but wasn't able to do it. I was in a tough spot, so I just volunteered Maureen for the presentation. The only time I've seen Maureen really angry was when I told her that I had committed her to do this presentation. I learned she hated to speak to large groups. It totally stressed her out, and I was totally out of line to volunteer her without asking. I learned my lesson."

Overcoming Challenges

Sue has encountered plenty of difficulty along the way. As a female business owner, balancing family responsibilities, it hasn't always been easy. She credits her broad support network including Maureen and her husband, Rob.

Sue and Rob have three children, Tanner, Sarah, and Siena. "Rob has played a larger-than-life role in the family. He gave the kids security and support by helping me loosen my grip and give the kids more independence."

He's also a massive supporter of Sue's work, business, and profession and he's often a sounding board for Sue's work. Although he works in the engineering industry, there are parallels in their contracts and consulting. Rob has helped Sue navigate some of the areas that are particularly challenging to female business owners. "Ninety-five percent of nutritionists are women. Many of us underestimate ourselves. We don't charge enough. We have one of the lowest paying professions. Rob has been a great

sounding board and shares valuable perspective. We talk about fee structures in contracts. Maureen's husband, Jeff, plays that role, too. I think we've been better about having our rates represent the value we bring to our clients because of our husbands' insight."

"Men just have it a little easier all the way around. Maybe it's because I grew up at a time and in an environment where women played a more submissive role. I think as a woman it's been harder to have your value translate into financial success."

Finding Meaning in her Work

Sue has always been motivated by the impact that her work has on others, but her work took on new meaning after Sue's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. "It impacted all of my siblings and me." Sue focused her research on the role nutrition plays in the prevention of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

There is no one formula when it comes to measuring risk for Alzheimer's, but regardless of risk factors, nutrition plays a vital role in prevention. "If one or both of your parents have or had Alzheimer's, your risk is higher. But if you even have genetic risk factors, there's a pronounced effect from things you do with your diet and other modifiable factors. If you don't exercise and you have a terrible diet, your risk for Alzheimer's is escalated. The opposite is also true. If you eat well and you exercise, it has a pronounced positive effect to help prevent dementia-related illnesses. It is really encouraging research."

Sue points to 3 pillars of a nutrition prevention plan: diet, exercise, and sunshine. The most important things to have in your

diet, says Sue, are leafy green vegetables, beans, and potatoes. "Eat your vegetables every day. Arugula, kale, watercress, cooked or raw, just eat your leafy greens. They are helpful for a healthy heart, cardiovascular, brain, digestive system, almost everything." Add beans and potatoes, and you've got a winning diet. "Every culture that lives long, and has a lower risk of heart disease and dementia eat beans or potatoes." Beyond diet, Sue says cardiovascular exercise is a critical component in a prevention plan.

Most people would guess diet and exercise are essential, but sunshine might come as a surprise. Research is demonstrating a Vitamin D deficiency ties to inflammation, neurological diseases, and kidney disease. Sue encourages testing of Vitamin D levels. She believes this is particularly important for the geographic regions Northern belt across of the United States that don't have regularly have year-round exposure to the sun.

Prevention of Alzheimer's and other dementia-related illnesses has struck a chord, not only with Sue's geriatric patients but with people of all ages. According to google trends, nutrition, Alzheimer's and aging are some of the most popular topics for the search engine. Demand for information and the lack of published books on the subject led a publishing company to ask Sue to write a book. In 2017, Sue's book with co-author, SeAnne Safaii-Waite, "The Alzheimer's Prevention Food Guide: A Quick Nutritional Reference to Foods That Nourish and Protect the Brain From

Alzheimer's Disease." While Sue only has data on the number of books sold at Amazon and not other outlets, she estimates she has sold over 45,000 books. In the first couple of weeks of the book's release on Amazon, it was on Amazon's list of best sellers in the Geriatric Health category.

For Sue, the book is a tribute to her mother who dedicated her life to Sue and her siblings. Now, Sue wants to provide the same care to her siblings by helping them prevent the disease that ravaged her mother.

She explains, "Science is uncovering things are happening in the body 15 years before people develop symptoms, so prevention is a significant body of research. My siblings are I have a higher physiological risk of Alzheimer's, but if I can help them understand the steps they can take to prevent the disease, then I have carried on my mom's legacy. It's what my mom would have wanted."