Her father owned a public relations firm and her mother was a journalist. Mary Ellen Miller has communications and small business ownership in her blood. She came from Buffalo, New York to Northeast Tennessee in 1985 as a news anchor for WJHL-TV. In the late 1980s, she made the move to corporate communications where she stayed until around 1990 when she became a founding partner of Creative Energy, an advertising, marketing and public relations firm.

Says Miller, “At that time the market was roaring and there were all sorts of neat options out there. Then Hunter, Smith and Davis approached me and wanted me to be their first marketing director. That was the light bulb moment. I thought, ‘If attorneys need a professional communicator then other professional business people do as well. One day I’m going to have my own business and help professionals with their communications strategies.’ That was in 2001 and from that point on I just kept looking for that opportunity. From the time I had the idea to start my own business my husband, who is a finance man, kept saying, ‘No, you need a steady paycheck.’ And I agreed.”

It wasn’t until 2009 that Miller found her opportunity to fly solo. “The economy was tanking,” she remembers. “I was working at ntara with a lot of high-end corporate clients. ntara did various types of work for Lexmark and Lexmark supplied Circuit City and they were going bankrupt. One third of the workforce was cut in February 2009 and it may sound funny but I knew that this was my opportunity.”

“I was severed,” she says, “So I poured myself into a blog that I called marketingmel.com. It’s my website now and it eventually became a marketing tool but initially I used it as a catharsis. After feeling sorry for myself for two or three days I dusted myself off and began seriously considering starting my own business.”

Miller bought a t-shirt that read, ‘Shut up and reinvent!’ and set out to do just that. “This time around my husband was very supportive of my plans and I began moving in that direc-
Successful Meetings Begin With People You Know.

“The work/life challenge is probably one of the most important things to learn when you work from home or have a mobile office,” Miller says. “When I started the business, I had a six-year-old son and I was working from home, with all those challenges going on. You have to have your family on board.”

Because she had the dream and goal of owning her own business for so long, the transition into business ownership was fairly smooth. “My biggest change was being solo,” Miller says. “I’m a people person and so that might be why I dove into the virtual world to chat with and find friends who are in similar lines of work. I would not have imagined four years ago how many virtual contacts I have, how much I work I do virtually, especially with other collaborators, other solo public relations people.

“I have a friend in Savannah and another in Northern Georgia,” she says. “The one in Savannah I’ve met at a conference once. The one in Northern Georgia I’ve never met personally. We’ve only Skyped. I wouldn’t have foreseen that four years ago but now that’s how the world works. I believe that I am the trend right now as far as being solo, a virtual agency. The great thing about being solo is the flexibility. The downside is you will work harder than you’ve ever worked in your life, you work longer hours and you work for the toughest boss you’ll ever have.”

And though Miller might not have foreseen her own virtual communications career, she says it makes sense, considering the world we live in today. “I do believe,” she says, “that every step along the way of my career led me to where I am now.”