

Newsday (Long Island, NY)

August 13, 2007

Edition: ALL EDITIONS

Section: BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY

Page: A40

Topics:

Index Terms:

COLUMN.

SMALL BUSINESS: Certification help for women, minorities

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Article Text:

Running a minority- or woman-owned business can be challenging, because the cards aren't always stacked in your favor.

But there are programs that can give your company an edge.

These types of programs, offered by the government or another third party, were created to help open up the procurement process for woman- and minority-owned firms by offering certification. Although getting certified doesn't guarantee success, experts say it could help level the playing field.

"If you're going to do business with the government or go after big commercial-type projects and you're a minority- or woman-owned business, you should go for your certification," says Gloria Glowacki, assistant director of the Small Business Development Center at Stony Brook, which assists entrepreneurs with the application process.

Certification, which ensures that the majority of a company's ownership, control and operation is in the hands of a woman or minority, is used as a marketing tool. Many large companies have supplier diversity programs aimed specifically at woman- and minority-owned businesses, notes Glowacki. On the state and federal level, the government has set goals for allocating procurement contracts to such companies, she adds.

For example, on the federal side the goal is for 5 percent of prime and subcontracts to go to women-owned companies and another 5 percent to small disadvantaged businesses, which would include minorities, says Sol Soskin of Bethpage-based Long Island Development Corp., which assists companies with the certification process.

Of course, not all of these goals are met each year, but the aim is to create more opportunity, experts say. Still, this doesn't mean you're guaranteed to get new business.

Eric Santiago, chief executive of VNF Nutrition in Port Jefferson Station, knows this all too well. Santiago, who got certified as a minority-owned business 10 years ago, says he hasn't gotten a shred of new business as a result.

"In my opinion, it wasn't worth it," says Santiago, who sells nutritional supplements.

But Yolanda Garner-Hutcherson, vice president of Grand Central Exterminating Co. in Hempstead, says being certified as a woman- and

minority-owned business has helped bring in new contracts, particularly on the state level.

"It puts us on the radar," says Garner-Hutcherson, who has done work for state health care facilities and schools.

You still have to do the legwork involved in getting a contract, says Gina Slater Parker, president of Black Women Enterprises (BWE) in Hempstead, which helps companies get certified. "You still have to compete and go through the bidding process," she says, noting that certification is just another arrow in your quiver. So how do you get certified?

For starters, different entities offer their own certification programs, Parker says. New York State has a program, as does New York City, Suffolk and Nassau. Each allows you to apply online for certification, something you should do for each level of government you anticipate wanting to do business with. Generally, certification gets your company listed in a directory of minority- and women-owned businesses, which are viewed by purchasers, procurement officers and contractors.

On the private sector side, fee-based certifications are offered by such groups as the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC), Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) and the National Women Business Owners Corp. (NWBOC), of which BWE is the administrator for the North Atlantic region. You can find out which certifications large firms prefer by checking out their Web sites.

That's what Judi Nadler, president of Inner-Pak Container in Patchogue, a maker of corrugated packaging products, plans to do. Nadler, who was certified by the WBENC last year, says her company has snagged about \$21,000 in new business thanks to the certification, and she's planning to go after more.

"I'm going to pursue some of the major pharmaceutical companies," Nadler says. She says the certification process was relatively easy. That isn't always the case, experts say, as there can be a lot of back and forth about documentation, particularly at the federal level.

"You have to stick with it," explains Anthony Trapani, executive director of Mega-Wega, Inc., a private certifier and consultant in Amityville.

One of the programs he helps companies get certified for helps in going after federal contracts.

New York State's certification program is accessible at [nylovesbiz.com/pdf/htbcert .pdf](http://nylovesbiz.com/pdf/htbcert.pdf). Nassau's is at [www .nassau countyny.gov/agencies/MinorityAffairs/MWBE _Pgm/vendor_cert.html](http://www.nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/MinorityAffairs/MWBE_Pgm/vendor_cert.html). And Suffolk's is at [www.co.suffolk .ny .us/webtemp3.cfm?dept= 24&id=2448](http://www.co.suffolk.ny.us/webtemp3.cfm?dept=24&id=2448).

So check it out.

Opportunity may only be a click away.