

I WANT MY WBE



Women-owned businesses benefit from third-party certifications.

BY **DIANNA
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Katharina Hoffman, president of Hoffman Commercial Landscaping, says getting a Women Business Enterprise (WBE) certificate isn't easy. It's a lot of paperwork. It takes a lot of time. And it isn't, she says, a free ticket to making money.

But she'll also tell you it saved her Caledonia, Wis.-based business. Hoffman credits her WBE certificate for the growth of her landscape design/build and maintenance firm, which she co-owns with her husband, from two employees to seven—and for the firm's trajectory toward topping \$1 million in revenue this year.

So what's a WBE certificate? It's validation given by a range of organizations, including local, county, state and federal governmental agencies and third-party groups, that proclaims a firm is at least 51-percent

woman-owned, woman-controlled and woman-managed.

Why would you want your firm to have this seal of approval? It opens the door to billions of dollars' worth of contracts with thousands of governmental agencies and large corporations.

As Rachel Owens, a principal at California-based consulting firm Succession Strategies puts it, "It's one more arrow in your quiver when you're talking to other entities you want to do business with." Owens presented a webinar on the who, what, why and how of WBE certification earlier this year for the National Association of Professional Women in Landscape.

Opportunity knocks

For Hoffman, it started in 2008, when she saw her company's commercial landscaping work dry up due to the economic downturn. Then when the condominium developer she and her husband were working with declared bankruptcy and left them unpaid for \$250,000 worth of completed work, she knew something had to change. And she noticed landscaping funded by state and government agencies was still under way.

That's when she decided to restructure her firm, get her WBE certificate and target city, county and state projects. Hoffman had first learned about WBE opportunities after subcontracting for a company that had Minority Business Enterprise status.

"Once I realized the opportunities out there with the minority status, I investigated on the Internet and found out about WBE and Disadvantage Business Enterprise certifications," she says.

Today, Hoffman Commercial Landscaping specializes in restoration and landscaping services for federal and state facilities, including park restoration and maintenance services; highway work, including seeding, planting and erosion control; wetlands prairie restoration; green roof projects and hydroseeding/hydromulching at municipal airports, all thanks to the WBE certificate.

"It's not waterfalls and beautiful gardens, but it's a great opportunity," says Hoffman.

Hers isn't the only Green Industry firm touting the benefits of a WBE designation.

Crystal Arlington, president and CEO of Affiliated Grounds Maintenance Group Inc. (AGMG), of

Lake City, Pa., says her WBE certificate has helped her double her business every year except one during the past five years and made it easier for her to work throughout the nation.

Today, she does business in 39 states, working with 7,000 contractors to offer



Katharina Hoffman

landscape management, lot sweeping, power washing, snow removal and ice management—and she's heading toward a seven-figure revenue tally this year.

That's not surprising, as experts say the targets for WBE firms are large and plentiful. Governmental agencies—and many corporations as well—have set-asides or supplier diversity programs that call for a certain percentage of all contracts to be given to women-owned businesses. The federal government, for example, purchases \$575 billion in goods and services, and a percentage of that business must go to a women-owned business, Owens says.

The WBE certificate shows a firm is eligible for those contracts. In some ways, a WBE is simply a marketing



Crystal Arlington

tool—it provides opportunity, but it doesn't guarantee profitability, longevity, expertise or capability, notes Owens. There's no size requirement—small firms, large firms and sole proprietorships can get a WBE certificate.

Two tracks

There are two ways to go about getting a WBE. If you're planning to target governmental agencies, one approach is to get a WBE certificate through the specific agency you plan to approach. That's what Hoffman did. She's certified with the state of Wisconsin, which allows her to bid on contracts for municipalities, counties and highway work.

Another way is to get a WBE through a third-party certifier. There is no single WBE certificate accepted across the

nation by all corporations or agencies; instead, there are two major third-party certifiers whose certificates are recognized by many corporations as well as many governmental organizations.

**THERE'S NO SIZE REQUIREMENT—
SMALL FIRMS, LARGE FIRMS AND SOLE PROPRIETORSHIPS CAN GET A WBE CERTIFICATE.**

The two third-party certifiers are the National Women Business Owners Corp. (NWBOC) and the Women Business Enterprise National Council. Both organizations are also third-party certifiers for the Small Business Administration's Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) program.

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Both organizations provide various support services to those seeking WBE certification and conduct site visits. There are Green Industry firms certified by both organizations.

Arlington went with a NWBOC WBE certificate, citing the ease of working with the organization, after learning about it at a women's business conference. She also notes the national WBE eased her paperwork burden. Instead of getting a WBE for each of the 39 states she



works in, the NWBOC qualifies her, and she's only had one potential client request additional certification.

WBE certification has allowed Hoffman Commercial Landscaping to grow its federal and state contracting work.

WBE certification is not for everyone. If you won't or can't do the paperwork, or your future goals don't include doing business with sizeable firms or governmental agencies, a WBE might not be for you. In addition to the paperwork, getting a WBE certificate includes a site visit during which you must prove your firm is indeed woman-owned, -controlled and -managed.

Getting your WBE isn't a pot of gold. "We still have to provide exceptional work, build relationships and do marketing. It all takes time," says Hoffman.

Getting started

Owens advises getting started by looking at what kind of organizations you want to target—corporations or

Finding WBE opportunities

Here are a few sites to start with to locate organizations that want to do business with WBE-certified companies.

For corporate work, look for Diversity Outreach Programs, or check with NWBOC or WBENC for buyers seeking WBEs.

For city, county and state agencies, check for offices such as Minority Business Development Offices or an Office of Small Disadvantaged Business Utilization. For federal government work, start here:

- » System for Award Management (sam.gov)
- » Federal Procurement Data Service (fpds.gov)
- » U.S. General Services Administration (gsa.gov)
- » Small Business Administration (sba.gov)



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government agencies. If you want to target government contracts, consider what agency you want to approach. That will help you decide what kind of WBE certification to pursue. You'll also need to budget for WBE application fees, which can range from \$350 to \$1,000, depending on a firm's revenue, and yearly renewal fees.

"All industries are in demand," says Owens, "and there is a reason to be certified. Spend the time, do your homework and get familiar with what the government is buying."

Getting the certificate, Owens notes, is only the first step, whether you're going for corporate or government business. The next step is market, market, market. Once you have your WBE certificate, she suggests sending out news releases, adding it to your marketing materials, registering with databases and

checking out opportunities via governmental portals.

"Sing it from the rooftop," advises Owens.

Both NWBOC and NBENC have lists of firms that are looking for vendors with WBE status. Doing business with government agencies also means looking at their requests for proposals (RFPs).

"I'm out there looking for jobs, talking to project managers. I'm not waiting," says Hoffman. Today, her firm bids on—and wins—contracts from state government; county and highway projects, including municipal green roof projects; sewer projects; and park maintenance, such as trail restoration.

"We're doing a lot of park work in Milwaukee," says Hoffman, "It's our little niche." **LM**

O'Brien is a freelance writer based in Columbia, Mo.

Proof positive

To get a WBE certificate, you'll have to prove these things via documentation and an on-site visit:



51 percent woman ownership. In the case of a sole proprietorship, you'll have to show you were the source of at least 51 percent of the starting capital.



51 percent woman controlled. For example, you must be on the bank signature card for your firm and if your corporation has a board of directors, you'll have to prove you're in control of the board as well.



51 percent woman operated. You'll have to show you're part of the day-to-day operations.



You've been in business for a period of time, which varies from six months to two years, depending on the certifier.



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