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## Certification Strategies

### *Six simple steps to reduce your Diversity Certification stress.*

My company has always been a women-owned business enterprise (WBE), and getting WBE-certified in 1989 was a piece of cake compared to today's rigorous process. Through various organizations and events I have met many other small business owners who became minority- or women-owned certified at the recommendation of a large corporate supplier diversity contact. They rushed off and acquired what they thought was the appropriate certification and then became disappointed when it didn't turn into magic contract awards ... not even with the organization that recommended s/he get certified. So, before you spend significant time, effort or money getting certified, strategizing could be your best first step. Of course, you'll have research homework to do before you can plan that strategy.

#### *Step One*

Start with your existing customers and talk with the people who actually buy from you now. (Are you a new business? Don't skip ahead.) Ask them direct questions about their commitment to supplier diversity. Would it be beneficial to them if you were certified? If your goods and services are purchased in an informal manner, your direct buyer might not know the added value that your certification brings to his or her company, so be sure to ask if they have a supplier diversity initiative, department or purchasing official.

If your current client has a supplier diversity department, contact them, too. Ask what certifications they accept, and if it is more than one or two, do they have a preference? Ask if they have a bidder registration process and make sure your business is registered in whatever database or website this client uses to identify potential suppliers. If your business is already certified, ask if the customer is aware of your certification. Most, if not all, large businesses and governments have diversity spend goals. If your business is MWBE certified, make sure the customer department tasked with meeting those goals is aware of your certification so they receive credit for money spent with you. Reminding your client of your certification could result in additional requests for quotes and potential sales.

If these contacts have the time and inclination to talk with you, see what other information they might be able to share about how they acquire what you offer – or if any changes in that acquisition process are planned. Don't forget to thank them for the information.

#### *Step Two*

Next, make use of your business or marketing plan, or whatever plan contains your targeted list of potential clients. Know your product and/or service codes (NAICS – North American Industry Classification System; SIC – Standard Industrial Classification; NIGP - National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, Inc.; or UNSPC - **United Nations** Standard Products and Services **Code**)<sup>1</sup> in addition to makes and models. This way you can reach out to your prospective purchasing professionals speaking a common language, to ask similar questions. Beyond what certifications they accept, take whatever opportunity s/he allows to find out how this client buys

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.naics.com/search.htm>; [http://www.osha.gov/pls/imis/sic\\_manual.html](http://www.osha.gov/pls/imis/sic_manual.html); <http://www.nigp.com/>; and <http://www.unspsc.org/> respectively.



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the goods or services you sell. Ask for their advice, and always remember to thank them for whatever information they provide. For example:

- Is the current product or service purchased under an existing contract? If so, can they tell you who the provider is? Is this provider required to meet any SMWDVBE (Small, Minority, Women, Disadvantaged or Disabled, Veteran Business Enterprise) goals? When is the contract expected to expire? Do they expect it to be renewed? If not, how will this purchase be made after the contract expires?
- Does the customer put out a formal request for proposal? If so, how do you get on that list? If not, how can you provide a quote?
- Does this client have capacity requirements (sales volume or otherwise)?
- Will they require bonding or any special insurance clauses if buying from a certified SMWVBE?
- Do they currently buy your offering from a certified SMWDVBE?
- Is there any purchasing trend analysis available on your product or service?

And anything else you think s/he might answer to help prepare you to support this client.

### **Step Three**

Do you know any other SMWDVBE certified businesses, in your industry or local community? Generally, we're a great source of information. Ask these contacts who they are certified by and why they chose a specific certification. Inquire about how the certification has helped them. Find out if they had a plan when they began the path to certification, and if it has worked out the way that they expected. What recommendations might they make to someone just starting the process? Stay in touch with these new contacts, and be willing to share your experiences, too. Information flowing in multiple directions is advantageous to us all.

### **Step Four**

Visit the web sites of the certifying agencies to get a feeling for their process. Talk with them to see what kind of results their members or certified businesses have reported to them. Is the agency tracking the success of their program? Can they tell you what products or services seem to be reporting the best results? Do they offer any services beyond the certification itself? Do you get a feeling that they are invested in the success of the businesses that they certify? Is there a fee associated with this certification program?

### **Step Five**

Find the organizations that host events or meetings connecting diversity suppliers with purchasers in your community, and make an effort to attend these sponsored events. Good sources of information about these events would be: your municipal, county or state Offices of Minority and Women Business Development; the closest Small Business Administration Office; local college or university business development programs; diversity-related Chambers of Commerce; calendars of events at sites such as [www.diversitybusiness.com](http://www.diversitybusiness.com); and organizations like Women's Business Enterprise National Council ([www.wbenc.org](http://www.wbenc.org)) and National Minority Supplier Diversity Council ([www.nmsdc.org](http://www.nmsdc.org)). Attend these events, even if it means a bit of travel, make new connections and ask your questions of the new contacts you make.

### **Step Six**

Now that you've gathered information and perspectives from all sides of the certification triangle, you can evaluate it and form your own strategic plan.



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- Choose the top two or three certifications you want to pursue. If one is a government agency in another state, review the rules carefully to find out if:  
They will accept your home state certification; or  
You have to be certified by the Unified Certification Program in your own state; or  
You have to be registered to do business in that state; or  
You have to be licensed to do business in that state.
- Review the check lists for these certification applications to make sure you have copies of all the supporting documentation you will need. Organize the information before you get started to make the process less stressful.
- Make sure you have access to a notary<sup>2</sup>, because every application requires that your affidavit be notarized.

Now you have the tools to begin successfully seeking the diversity certifications that will benefit your business and its customers.

**About the author:** Joanne E. Peterson is the President/CEO of Abator - a small, disadvantaged women business enterprise (a. k. a. SDWBE), which currently holds 14 WBE certifications and has a deep passion for helping clients achieve intelligent use of information technology.

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<sup>2</sup> No notary? Find one at [www.notarypublic.com](http://www.notarypublic.com).