

# Certification can help women's businesses

## Designation opens doors to jobs, contract

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CONTRIBUTOR

Marion Ogden discovered pretty quickly that it wasn't going to be easy to be taken seriously as a woman business owner. The gender bias she encountered still stings.

"I started my business in 1986, and I remember being called a 'token woman' to my face," Ogden said. "People would come in and ask me, 'Where's Mike, where's the boss?' and he worked for me!"

Ogden owns Auburn-based Centon Industries, distributors of standard and specialty nuts and bolts.

She and other women business owners have discovered that one way to combat prejudice and increase the availability of contracts is to become certified on the federal, state and local levels.

Valerie Southern of Valerie J. Southern Transportation Consultant LLC in Issaquah, prepares 20-year transportation plans for highways, roadways, bus systems, and public transportation. She advises local, state and federal government agencies on how to respond to growth and deal with their long-term transportation issues.

"I'm the only female-owned minority firm that does this work in the state of Washington, so (certification) seemed like a practical thing to do," Southern said. "It got me in touch with federal contractors. It's not a given that you'll get a contract, but at least once you are certified, you're in the queue."

Certification comes in several forms, from the federal government under the auspices of the Small Business Administration, or SBA; at the state level from the Office of Minority and Women's Business Enterprise, or OMWBE; and at the regional/global level from the Astra Women's Business Alliance and Women's Business Enterprise National Council, or WBENC.

Certification from those entities provides varying degrees of introductions and referrals to government and private corporations, so a woman's business can sell its products or services to those agencies and companies and satisfy their requirements for working with minorities and women, who are considered to be disadvantaged in the marketplace.

The SBA actually has two programs that issue certifications, the 8(a) and the Small Disadvantaged Business.

Both programs are designed for minorities, because the federal government doesn't recognize Caucasian women as minorities. Women are allowed to apply for 8(a) certification only if they have a preponderance of evidence to show they've been dis-



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**Valerie Southern, an Issaquah consultant, has been fixing Seattle area traffic trouble for 20 years. She prepares 20-year transportation plans for local, state and federal agencies.**

criminated against in the marketplace because they are female.

"The woman business owner has to demonstrate on paper how she was personally subjected to discriminatory practices," said Diana Drake, assistant district director for the 8(a) and SDB programs, and lead business opportunity specialist. "It's not enough to say she's a displaced homemaker, she needs to tell us how this personally affected her in getting jobs, starting her own business, applying for a loan and being credit worthy."

Drake noted that 23 percent of all federal dollars spent on private companies are mandated for small businesses, 5 percent of prime and subcontracts are to be slated for small disadvantaged business and another 5 percent are slated for women-owned business, with 3 percent going to locations with historically under-utilized businesses (HUB). Another 3 percent is set aside for service-disabled veteran-owned business.

"Add it all up and barely 40 percent of the government's business goes to minority and women-owned business," Drake said. "And the federal government was having trouble even meeting these small goals for using minority and women-owned business, until an act of Congress in 2003 made it mandatory that they meet their goals and made them accountable for reaching them."

The local SBA has been going out into the community and letting

women know about the SBA and other certification programs, so the federal government can meet their goals.

"We've been going out and meeting more with government buyers from various agencies and educating them on where to look for small businesses," Drake said. "It's worked well, because these agencies are now meeting their goals."

The local SBA holds two matchmaking events a year, when they invite 8(a) and SDB certified businesses to meet with people from the Department of Energy, The Boeing Company, Todd Shipyards and the Ports of Seattle and Tacoma, to name a few, to pitch their products or services.

Because the 8(a) program is so rigorous in vetting business for their certification, Drake noted that if you have 8(a) certification, you'll also have SDB

certification if you qualify. She also noted that the competition pool for 8(a) certification is small, as there are currently fewer than 10,000 businesses thus certified, while the number of SDB certifications is twice that, because a disadvantaged business can be run by any gender.

Applications for 8(a) and SDB certification can be downloaded online at [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov). Congress mandated that the SBA process applications in 90 days, but Drake said they currently have a 60-day turnaround time. If applicants need help with their application process or with proving that they've been discriminated against,

they can get assistance from an SBA partner organization called the Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) in Seattle. All SBA certifications are free.

Marion Ogden said that she found the PTAC most valuable in helping her get certified.

"They were just wonderful in helping me understand the process and giving me the tools to find the contracts," she said. "I started my business with \$600 in cash, and last year I did over a million dollars in business, so it can be done. You have to keep yourself open to new information."

The OMWBE program took 6 months to certify Southern's business, and the federal 8(a) program took 8 months. The OMWBE in the state capital also does two kinds of certification, a state MWBE certification and a disadvantaged business enterprises certification, or DBE, via the Federal Department of Transportation. The DBE certification is only for people who work on highways or for transportation agencies.

The MWBE certification is not as paper-intensive as other certifications, and generally takes 45 days to complete, according to Carolyn Crowson, OMWBE director.

"Our certification helps women market their business," said Crowson. "Our directory of certified business is open to many public agencies like the school district and companies like Washington Mutual and Microsoft, and they search our directory because their supplier diversity programs can be fulfilled this way."

The OMWBE also has a linked deposit loan program that gives certified business a 2 percent discount on business loans. But Crowson emphasizes that it's important to call the OMWBE office before you fill out an application to make sure you are eligible.

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~ Valerie Southern,  
Issaquah businesswoman