

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



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