

Emerging Themes

During the roundtable discussion, many issues were raised, such as access to useful resources, quality control, OSDDBU effectiveness, large budgets/small staff, use of the GSA schedule, contract bundling, access to capital, and impact on the level of success in accessing government markets. The following major ideas, themes, and issues emerged.

Failure to Meet the Five Percent Goal: While some federal agencies have done an excellent job of including women-owned businesses in prime and subcontracts and have reached their goals, the five percent goal has never been reached government-wide. This failure appeared to some women business owners to be a lack of commitment on the part of federal agencies to attain the goal. However, it was acknowledged that women-owned businesses share some of the responsibility by not aggressively pursuing registration on government bidder lists, information, relationships, and contacts to gain contracts or subcontracts. Incentives could be offered to procurement officials to encourage them to award contracts to new suppliers and provide greater access for women-owned businesses.

Role of the Federal Offices of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization: The OSDDBU representatives clearly stated the actions taken by their agencies to increase the utilization of women-owned businesses. These best practices included developing conferences and roundtables to describe programs and provide one-on-one contacts; providing incentives to prime contractors to subcontract to women-owned businesses; holding training programs; developing Web sites for communication; establishing vendor outreach and mentoring programs; un-bundling large contracts into smaller contracts; and providing a wealth of written materials.

Evaluation of Federal Agencies and Prime Contractors to Ensure Compliance: The OSDDBU offices provide oversight of contractors and their own agencies for the inclusion of

women-owned businesses. Agencies have SBA procurement center representatives (PCRs) who provide oversight for small business set-aside programs and audit small business offices. Contracts should be analyzed before the re-application period to see if prime contractors are using women-owned businesses as subcontractors. One agency monitors its prime contractors and, if they do not use their subcontractors, they will not be allowed to compete for additional work. Automated systems are used to track low-goal contractors. Automated systems should have a box related to women-owned small business contracts.

A Budgetary Set-Aside to Ensure Meeting the Five Percent Goal: Several OSDDBU representatives and women business owners promoted the idea of having a budgetary set-aside for women-owned businesses similar to the one for veteran-owned businesses and small businesses in general. The competition for bidding on some requirements could then be restricted to small, women-owned businesses.

Methods of Gaining Access to Government Contracts: Women business owners need to better position their businesses to take advantage of contracting opportunities by getting on the GSA Schedule; targeting the appropriate agency by matching their services to needs; attending conferences, forums, classes, etc., to establish relationships and become informed; using Web sites to learn about contracting opportunities and the goals and structures of various agencies; and marketing directly to prime contractors or the federal government. Businesses should be responsible for registering on the federal Central Contractor Registration (CCR) and other government bidder lists. Hiring a consultant might be necessary when working with some federal agencies and to save time and money, but some cautioned to “let the buyer beware.” Marketing requires continual effort, time, and monetary expenditures.

Role of Women's Business Organizations to Provide Information and Training:

The Council acknowledged that there is an important role for women's business organizations to play, not only in sharing information with their members but by providing procurement-related training and information at conferences. The Council could serve as a portal for information and provide linkage between organizations, or facilitate training for women business owners to learn about various agencies and establish contacts.

Action Plans, Program Recommendations

Following the roundtable discussion, the Council members held two follow-up conference calls to review the points raised during the roundtable and to discuss future actions. Based on the issues discussed, the following actions are being undertaken:

- ★ Disseminate notices on Government procurement activities and events to the Council and others to be more proactive in linking women business owners to government contracting offices and OSDBUs. This will be done through the Council's procurement-focused Web site, www.womenbiz.gov, the Council's e-newsletter, *Engage!*, and other targeted electronic communication.
- ★ The Council's www.womenbiz.gov Web site will be updated and revised to be even more dynamic and inclusive. It will be promoted

more strongly among women business owners and women business organizations.

- ★ The Council is engaged in a research study to uncover and highlight "best practices" within OSDBUs for reaching out to and increasing agency spending with women-owned businesses. This study will be published in late spring 2005.
- ★ The Council staff will increase their involvement with OSDBUs and OSDBUs' women business owner advocates. In particular, the Council will: organize meetings with women business advocates of OSDBUs to raise their awareness of the special challenges of women business owners and discuss recommendations on how women business owners can better access government markets; attend OSDBU outreach activities and provide information on the NWBC; and continue to participate in monthly OSDBU Council meetings and events.

The National Women's Business Council continues to monitor issues related to government procurement from both women business owners' and OSDBUs' perspectives. The Council will continue to play a monitoring and reporting role vis-à-vis government action to reach and exceed the five-percent procurement goal, and will work with federal policy makers to explore more effective means by which this goal can be achieved.

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The National Women's Business Council is a bi-partisan federal government council created to serve as an independent source of advice and counsel to the President, Congress, and the U.S. Small Business Administration on economic issues of importance to women business owners. Members of the Council are prominent women business owners and leaders of women's business organizations. For more information about the Council, its mission and activities, contact: National Women's Business Council, 409 3rd Street, SW, Suite 210, Washington, DC 20024; phone: 202-205-3850; fax: 202-205-6825; email: info@nwbc.gov, Web site: <http://www.nwbc.gov>