

# Forbes

## How Women Can Up Their Chances Of Winning Government Contracts

BY GERI STENDEL



Women own 29% of all businesses but only 2% of women-owned businesses grow beyond \$1 million, according to the 2013 State of Women-Owned Businesses Report. Businesses in general are nearly three times more likely to produce revenues of a million plus than women-owned businesses.

Access to customers is one of the reasons women-owned business are less likely to grow big. Women's lack of connections to large customers is holding back their potential. Twenty years ago, the federal government recognized that it could be part of the solution. It established the goal of spending 5% of its purchasing dollars with women-owned businesses. Women-owned businesses that have gotten federal government contracts are 23 times more likely to break through that \$1 million+ revenue barrier, according to Women and Minority Small Business Contractors: Divergent Paths to Equal Success.

The federal government has yet to reach that goal, according to 21st Century Barriers to Women's Entrepreneurship conducted by the Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship. Studies find that women entrepreneurs face challenges getting access to relevant, sufficiently specialized business training and counseling, which is important for business growth, according to the same report.

It's not just the feds that recognize the importance of women-owned businesses. Local governments do, too. In New York City, the importance of those missing connections is also recognized so the city provides training and mentoring programs. New York City puts a special emphasis on helping minority and women-owned businesses, according to Maria Torres-Springer, Commissioner of the NYC Department of Small Business Services. Many of the city's programs include a component that helps these entrepreneurs connect with mentors who can provide support, guidance, and new ideas based on their personal experiences, she said.

New York City School Construction Authority and Small Business Services provide a comprehensive approach to support women- (and minority) owned businesses to ensure that these businesses have the ability to win and execute contracts that meet agencies' standards, said Sandra Wilkin, president of Bradford Construction, which contracts to provide the training and mentorship programs offered by government agencies.

"It can be daunting for women-owned businesses to go through the procurement process for the first time and winning a government contract is not easy," said Dr. Marsha Firestone, President and Founder of Women Presidents' Educational Organization (WPEO). "But women who have gone through the process can share valuable lessons with other women business owners who are submitting proposals for the first time."

It's not just about training, the program provides mentors who procure goods and services from the government, successful entrepreneurs who do business with the city and subject matter experts, said Wilkin. Support is customized to individual needs of the women business owner.

Getting government contracts is hard work. Not only do you have to be certified as a women-owned business, you have to actively pursue networking and partnering if you want to work with the government, said Pamela Prince Eason, CEO of Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) in an interview with Associated Press.

What steps will you take to win government contracts?