

## Weconnect gives businesswomen shot at selling to chains

By Harley Richards - Red Deer Advocate

Published: February 14, 2011 8:45 PM  
Updated: February 14, 2011 8:48 PM



Red Deer Advocate February 2011

There are about 900,000 female entrepreneurs in Canada, yet women-owned businesses make up fewer than five per cent of the suppliers in this country that serve corporations and governments domestically and abroad.

That's the estimate of WEConnect Canada, a non-profit organization that's trying to cut businesswomen a bigger piece of the supply pie. It certifies operations that are at least 51 per cent owned, managed and controlled by women — giving them a potential foot in the door with purchasing heavyweights like Wal-Mart and Staples.

Betty Wood, lead strategist with WEConnect, explained that many corporations have supplier diversity programs that encourage dealings with under-represented suppliers like women and ethnic minorities. But sellers require proof that they qualify.

"If you're not certified, you can't access their supplier diversity programs," said Wood, pointing out that WEConnect is the only organization in Canada that provides such gender certification.

Launched in March 2009, it's approved 110 businesses — including seven in Alberta. Among these are Happy Hippo Bath Company (which also operates as Lollipop Beauty Bar) in Sylvan Lake and Result Safety Apparel in Red Deer.

“Everybody wants to sell to chains,” said Happy Hippo owner Jodee Prouse. “Imagine how many people are trying to knock down their doors.”

She hopes WEConnect certification will enable Happy Hippo and Lollipop to at least make a pitch to buyers with supplier diversity programs.

“They still have to want your product and at the end of the day you have no more of a chance than anybody else, only you do get to at least present to them.”

Result Safety owner Heather Thomas is also optimistic the certificate will help her business — a wholesale distributor of fire-resistant work wear and other safety apparel — get noticed.

“I hoped to increase the visibility and profile of my company to a group of corporations that a business of my size would normally not have access to.

“WEConnect may give women-owned companies the chance to demonstrate our abilities as business leaders on a level playing field and compete fairly in the marketplace.”

Businesses certified by WEConnect have ranged from marketing professionals to an auto parts manufacturer, said Wood.

“They’re in every kind of industry.”

Meanwhile, the list of companies with supplier diversity programs is growing, she added. They’re motivated by a desire to tap into the innovative talents of female entrepreneurs, to buy from suppliers that better reflect the consumers their businesses sell to, and to be good corporate citizens, said Wood.

Supplier diversity programs have also been shown to bring monetary benefits, she pointed out.

“They find there is an actual return to the bottom line of about two per cent when they’re buying from diverse suppliers.”

Companies with supplier diversity programs can find female-owned sellers on WEConnect’s database of certified businesses. Relationships are also forged at WEConnect’s annual conference or at forums organized by the U.S.-based Women Business Enterprise National Council — upon which WEConnect was modelled.

“If you go to one of those events you can just go and talk to a buyer,” said Wood, pointing out that a Women Business Enterprise trade show held every June attracts 3,000 people and 350 to 400 exhibitors.

“Where else would you have an opportunity to meet 400 buyers?”

“That seems to be where the magic happens.”

Certified businesses also trade with each other, said Wood, and some owners take part in a mentorship program through which they can learn from other female entrepreneurs.

“Some of the women have said that they don’t ever expect to be able to sell directly to Wal-Mart but they really want to be in the company of and exposed to these other women, who are like-minded and are growing their businesses.”

Wood doesn't believe female-operated businesses are the victims of gender bias. Rather, she thinks buyers tend to deal with suppliers they already have a relationship with.

"What we're trying to do is give (women) some opportunities to build and compete for some of these contracts to help them grow their businesses."

To be certified, a female-owned businesses must apply to WEConnect and submit to a comprehensive review of its operations — including a site visit.

"We do quite a lot of due diligence in order to prove that they're owned, managed and controlled by a woman or women," explained Wood.

Happy Hippo and Result Safety passed the screening process last fall and are now displaying their certificates prominently.

"We're very proud we're female-driven," said Prouse.

Additional information about WEConnect Canada can be found online at [www.weconnectcanada.org](http://www.weconnectcanada.org).

[hrichards@reddeeradvocate.com](mailto:hrichards@reddeeradvocate.com)