

July 9-15, 2004

# CERTIFIED WOMAN-OWNED



Commercial real estate attorney Stephanie Friese says certification as a woman-owned business doesn't guarantee she'll get business, but it does mean she has a chance to prove herself.

By Tom Barry  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Stephanie Friese has one lingering regret: The commercial real estate attorney wishes she hadn't waited so long to get her small Midtown law firm — three-attorney Friese and Price Law Firm LLC — certified as a woman-owned business.

Friese said certification will play a big role in building business with corporations that are out to diversify their supplier network.

"I really believe our potential is unlimited," Friese said. "Certification is my 'in' with corporate America. While it doesn't guarantee that I'm going to get business, it does mean that I now have a

chance to prove myself. Just getting that chance can be difficult for a small, woman-owned firm."

No matter the business, securing contracts with major corporations often is a formidable task, and many woman- or women-owned businesses are going the certification route to increase their odds. By diversifying their supplier network, corporations also stand to gain, both in the marketplace and in landing contracts from government.

If the good old boys can network — and Atlanta history shows they have some talent for it — why can't women?

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Nancy Staton  
Georgia Women Entrepreneurs,  
University of Georgia's Business  
Outreach Services

“Certification can open doors for a woman-owned business,” said Nancy Staton, director of the Georgia Women Entrepreneurs division of the University of Georgia’s Business Outreach Services in Athens. “It’s a marketing tool that can offer women real opportunities they otherwise might not have, especially with larger corporations.”

Certification came a few months ago for Friese, who already has landed business with The Coca-Cola Co. (NYSE: KO) and now is trying to forge relationships with other top Atlanta companies.

“Corporate business probably will make up half of our income one day,” she said.

The 28-year-old Friese owns 51 percent of the law firm she founded in 1999 after graduating from the University of Georgia Law School. Her partners are husband Alon Price and father James Friese. The three-attorney firm does both transactional and litigation work in commercial real estate.

The firm is certified by both the Women’s Business Enterprise National Council Inc. (WBENC) and the National Women Business Owners Corp. (NWBOC). More than 4,000 women-owned businesses nationally are certified by WBENC, the better-known body.

The certification process is long and involved. While many corporations recognize certification — more than 500 U.S. companies and government agencies accept the WBENC imprimatur — many don’t. Many companies run their own certification process.

The paperwork can be mind-numbing, especially for a small enterprise like Friese and Price, which has only eight employees.

“It all depends on the company’s bureaucratic setup,” Friese said. “If you have WBENC certification, for instance, you automatically get on the supplier list with some corporations. Other entities, particularly governments like the city of Atlanta, operate their own certification program. So you have to submit the paperwork all over again.”

Diversifying your supplier network is simply good business, said Johnnie Booker, director of supplier diversity for Coca-Cola.

“We sell consumer products, and women make most of the purchasing decisions

regarding our products,” Booker said. “For us, having a diverse network — in terms of both minority- and women-owned businesses — reverberates in the marketplace.”

Certification also greatly streamlines the process, she said. “We don’t have the resources to go out and do site visits with all these businesses to determine if they’re actually woman-owned.”

Critically, a site visit by a certifying body safeguards against abuse, Booker said. Companies have portrayed themselves as woman- or women-owned when in fact they were owned, managed and controlled by a father, husband, brother or other male, she said.

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**Stephanie Friese**  
Friese and Price Law Firm LLC

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“Businesses have abused the process by using the woman as a front,” Booker said. “With certification, the owner is interviewed and there are in-depth processes to determine just who owns, manages and controls the business.”

Fifty-one percent ownership is the governing standard.

Coca-Cola is so supportive of certification that it co-sponsored the Washington, D.C.-based WBENC’s recent mega-conference in New Orleans.

Friese, who said her firm did not have to be restructured in order to meet certification standards, knows about paperwork.

“NWBOC’s process was the more intense,” she said. “Over a two-month period, we compiled a binder of documents two inches thick. They asked for income statements, credit authorizations, incorporation papers, bank signature card, even my birth certificate. They even wanted the

supporting documents our accountant had used in preparing our tax returns, to show continuing ownership.

“As for WBENC, we started gathering information in October, submitted it in December and received certification in February,” Friese said. NWBOC certification followed in March.

UGA’s Staton said the time-consuming process deters many women business owners from applying.

“Many who are doing well in business think, ‘Why should I go through all that?’” said Staton. “Whether you do or not depends largely on what your goals are. If you want to work with larger companies, it’s a good way to get more business.”

But not only big entities. Corporations sometimes demand that companies with which they do business maintain a diverse supplier network, too, which can have a ripple effect on down the line.

“Construction companies often fall into this category,” Staton said. “A general contractor may require its subcontractors to have a diverse supplier base.”

Friese has some advice for female entrepreneurs making the certification leap.

“Be very organized. ... and make sure you have all the documentation that’s been requested,” she said. “People need to understand that the certifying organization uses volunteers to review the applications. They’re women business owners themselves, and so their time is very limited. If your application isn’t organized, you can really lessen your chances.”

Also, be realistic.

“Obviously, you’re not going to get business just because you’re a woman,” Friese said. “You have to promote your strengths as a business with the corporation. You have to develop relationships with the people who will funnel business to you. It probably takes a year or so to really develop those relationships.”

For lawyers, that’s even harder to do. Professional ethics bars attorneys from making cold calls on businesses. An intermediary must make the introduction.

Despite the hurdles, Friese sees her business on a sharp upward arc.

“Certification’s a great way to build a reliable customer base,” she said.