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Supporting Women Entrepreneurs

Navigating Business Ownership
with Shared Insights



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Insights and Resources for Women Entrepreneurs

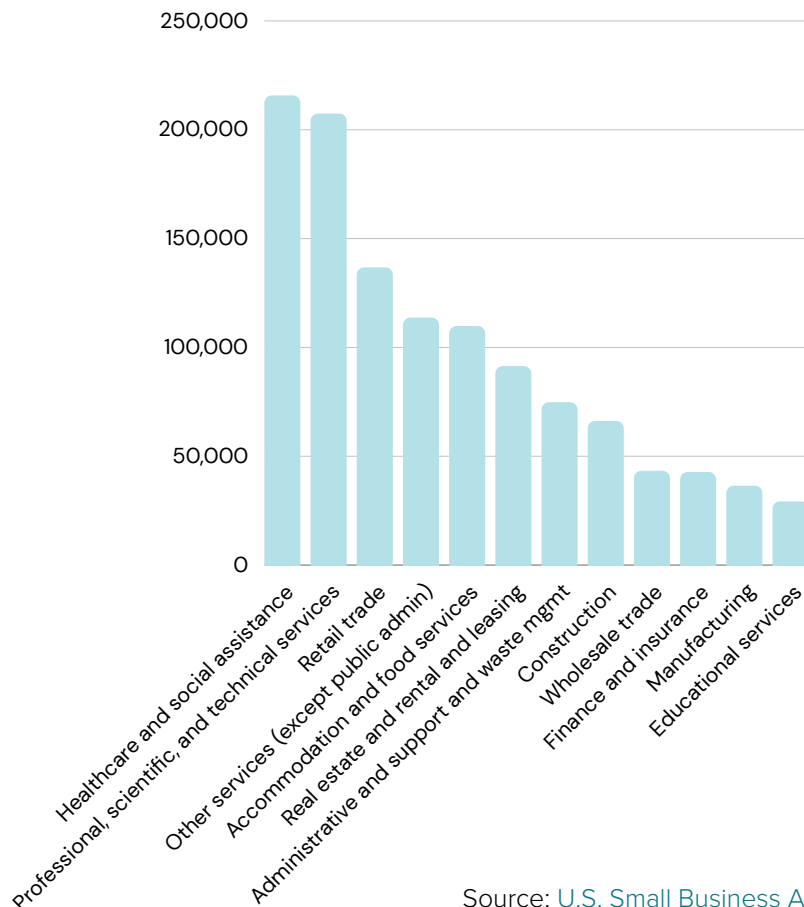
When it comes to navigating new terrain as a business owner, few things help more than the firsthand experience of peers.

Fortunately, female entrepreneurs are not alone in managing a business. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, there are over 12 million U.S. businesses with similar ownership, and they employ more than 10.1 million people.

Networks and resources are available if you are looking for peers or to work with a women-owned business. Women own businesses spanning the gamut of industries from healthcare to finance to construction.



Women-owned Businesses by Sector



Source: [U.S. Small Business Administration](#)

Whether you're looking to serve government entities or corporations, access loan or grant programs, or navigate the unique needs of their business, this guide will help you:

- Know where to start networking with peers
- Prepare to serve government entities and public utilities
- Fine-tune your approach to doing business with large corporations
- Learn about obtaining funding

We've gathered this information from the suggestions and observations of local female entrepreneurs and leaders.

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Finding Support Among Peers

For Amy Thompson, who founded New Life Dental Arts in 2007, collaboration with peers is a new and welcome resource as she manages her independent dental office in Lake Stevens, Wash. But she didn't always have access to fellow dentists.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Thompson explained that other dental business owners worked without sharing much information with each other. "Independent dental offices looked at each other as competition," Thompson said. "It was the decades-old idea that we couldn't collaborate or learn from each other. Then everyone needed to figure out how to operate during COVID-19."

Dentists had recommendations and expectations coming at them from all sides. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Dental Association, and the Washington State Dental Association each had recommendations on how to keep patients safe. "We had all known each other before the pandemic, and we were all trying to filter through and figure out what would work for our teams and our staff," Thompson said. Then, one person just set up group text, and we've since become an informal group of women dentists in our county collaborating via text message."

Thompson said that even when dentists in the group have moved to different states, they've remained involved. What once were local "competitors" are now relationships. "Even though some have moved to Montana or California, we can talk on Zoom and be states apart. There's so much to learn from colleagues and other similar businesses," she said.

In 2007, Thompson started her practice with three dentist's chairs. Now, her practice has seven chairs, and another dentist has joined her. Access to both the informal dentist's group and peer groups focused on business, regardless of their ownership, have been worth her time from day one, Thompson said.



Supporting Each Other

One way to build community with other female entrepreneurs is to use them for services your business needs.

There's no Yelp for women-owned businesses, but the Office of Minority and Women's Business Enterprises (OMWBE) has [an online searchable directory](#) of minority and women-owned businesses. Create an account and submit an application to [become OMWBE certified](#) – for just \$25 – and people passionate about working with women-owned businesses can find you there.

"Don't just put it on your website; go get certified with the state," said Danica Mason, Principal at Red Team Go! "When we went looking for corporate counsel, we went specifically and found a woman-owned law office."

Mason founded her company in 2010 to provide inclusion management consulting to heavy civil, transportation, and water utility projects. "We also found our CPA, which is a women-owned firm; through our counsel; we really search out other female [entrepreneurs]," Mason said. "I have been consistently referring people to them for 11 years. And the law firm is still our corporate counsel for everything from non-disclosures to employee handbooks."



State and Federal Designations for Business Ownership

In Washington, state agencies, higher educational institutions, some local governments, and private companies look for businesses [certified by the state's Office of Minority and Women's Business Enterprises \(OMWBE\)](#) to meet their diversity goals.

OMWBE reported 3,144 businesses were certified at the end of 2022. The state has five designations:

- MBE - Minority Business Enterprise – owned by minority men
- WBE - Women's Business Enterprise – owned by non-minority women
- MWBE - Minority Women's Business Enterprise – owned by minority women
- CBE - Combination Business Enterprise – owned by non-minority women and minority men
- SEDBE - Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Business Enterprise – owned by non-minority men deemed socially and economically disadvantaged on a case-by-case basis

[The Washington State Department of Veteran Affairs](#) provides certification for Veterans and Servicemembers.

- VBE – Veteran Owned Business Certification – owned by a Veteran or Servicemember



Obtaining Women-Owned Work

For female entrepreneurs, government contracting in the state of Washington represents a growing opportunity.

Washington is working to expand state agency and higher education contracts and procurement with certified minority- and women-owned businesses. According to the [Washington State Office of Minority & Women's Business Enterprises 2022 Annual Report](#), in 2022, state agencies and Educational institutions spent more than \$178 million with such firms. About \$72.5 million was with women-owned businesses.

In construction projects for state infrastructure, for example, major contractors include goals for women-owned, as well as veteran and minority businesses, to win bids for projects. In a recent \$700 million project in Washington, the winning contractor committed to 10% minority-owned, 6% women-owned, 5% veteran-owned, and 5% small business.

Contractors even now work with consultants to push those levels beyond that 26% of the job by as much as 10%, said Mason.

The mindset of large contractors is moving toward prioritizing minority and women-owned businesses. "We know the small, disadvantaged business community is not necessarily the cheapest; they're not the low bidders a lot of the time, but if they can come within 10%, we need to consider it," she said. "We also need to open those doors by working with them when they need bonding and insurance."

Certified women-owned businesses are designated a "Women's Business Enterprise (WBE)" and Minority Business Entrepreneurs (MBE) by the state of Washington, which follows the federal certification guidelines. To obtain it, owners share their operating agreements and bylaws, proof of ownership, and three years of personal and business tax returns. If married, the state often requests a spouse's resume.

"They will also interview to ensure the business is, in fact, majority women-owned," Mason said. "It has to be truly 51% majority-owned by a woman. And there can be major consequences for companies that aren't truthful in obtaining the designation. These can become a full investigation by the state inspector general."



Once a business becomes certified, it can't assume it will receive contracts. Mason suggested a starting place to gauge their readiness to earn contracts:

- Report who you worked for; did you meet the project's schedule and budget?
- Are you financially sound?
- Do you have your bonding in place?
- Do you have the correct insurance?
- Can you provide references?
- Are you prepared to be a part of the bidding process?

"The lack of answers to each of these doesn't preclude you from government contracting," Mason explained. "We can often work with companies on bonding and insurance."

Mason said she would have certified her business as woman-owned with the state earlier, close to when she founded it in 2010. "I would base the certification I chose based on the work I am going after," she said. "Most states will require you to be certified through the OMWBE."



Building Relationships with Corporate Customers

Companies such as Meta, Google, and Microsoft are all setting similar goals for working with women, minorities, and small businesses, according to Mason. When these larger corporate companies build new offices or campuses, they often set goals to utilize the services of local businesses.

"We're seeing technology companies begin to look for many different types of services from catering to office supplies to cleaning services," she said. "They will even look for various types of consulting from local companies."

Mason said that corporations often set goals with an eye for the available population of small and diverse businesses from the community, and they establish that in part based on public records. If women want to see more work for women-owned businesses, a way to affect that directly is to ensure their business is certified and listed with OMWBE.

Another avenue for courting corporate relationships is through the [Women's Business Enterprise Council Pacific](#) (WBEC Pacific), which educates and trains women business owners in pursuing government and corporate contracting. WBEC Pacific has over 1,100 certified women business owners in its network; the national organization has some 18,000 certified owners nationwide.

"I recommend to people, to get all the certifications available to you because you don't want to be waiting for it when you are trying to win a contract," said Dr. Janice R. Greene, President & CEO of WBEC Pacific. "Companies like AT&T, Comcast, Microsoft, Amazon, and Google send their supplier diversity leaders to our events."

It's not a golden ticket to work with those companies. However, WBEC Pacific's certification gains a business owner access to that network and events and allows owners to meet with international organizations in settings where the women-owned businesses are known to be certified.



Funding a Women-Owned Business

Thompson said if she were mentoring another female entrepreneur, one piece of advice she would offer would be, "Don't wait to start your business, and don't be afraid of debt." She utilized financing from Coastal Community Bank to make tenant improvements and purchase equipment to start her dental practice.

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) also has a business development program known as the 8(a) Business Development program, which Congress created to help provide funding for women-owned small businesses. To qualify, SBA requires that your company:

- Be a [small business](#)
- Not have previously participated in the 8(a) program
- Be at least 51% owned and controlled by U.S. citizens who are socially and economically disadvantaged
- Have a personal net worth of \$850 thousand or less, adjusted gross income of \$400 thousand or less, and assets totaling \$6.5 million or less
- Demonstrate good character
- Demonstrate the potential for success, such as having been in business for two years

The best resource for owners researching funding options is often their local banker. They can introduce you to state – and to city and grant – which may not be readily available through a search online.

Locally, female entrepreneurs can utilize organizations like the [Washington Center for Women in Business](#) (WCWB) for training, mentoring, business development, and even financing. [Business Impact NW](#) is another nonprofit in Washington, known as a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), it provides coaching, classes, and access to capital to small businesses, with an emphasis on working with traditionally underserved populations – women among them.

[Hello Alice](#) is a woman and minority-owned company that publishes information on grants from Mastercard, eBay, Amazon, FedEx, and other organizations. Visit it's [grants page](#) for more information.





Resources from the Small Business Administration

The SBA offers online training for women on business ownership through [DreamBuilder](#), which is also available in Spanish. The agency also publishes a list of national organizations that serve women who own small business:

- [Association for Enterprise Opportunity \(AEO\)](#)
- [Association of Women's Business Centers \(AWBC\)](#)
- [National Association of Women in Construction](#)
- [National Association of Women in Real Estate Businesses \(NAWRB\)](#)
- [National Association of Women's Business Owners \(NAWBO\)](#)
- [U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce \(USWCC\)](#)
- [Women's Business Enterprise National Council \(WBENC\)](#)
- [Women Impacting Public Policy \(WIPP\)](#)
- [Women's Presidents' Organization \(WPO\)](#)

Create a Community

In the ever-evolving landscape of entrepreneurship, female business owners are not alone. Entrepreneurs can chart a course toward success together by leveraging the insights, support, and resources available within the vibrant community of women-owned businesses.

The best resource is truly the firsthand experience of other women, according to Thompson, Mason, and Greene.

"Get the right people around you, and be willing to be coached," Thompson said. "Don't do it alone."

To talk with a local banker at Coastal Community Bank, call us at 425.257.9000. To see our full range of business banking solutions, visit www.coastalbank.com. View other business resources like this one at www.coastalbank.com/businessresources.

