GUIDE TO PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN BUSINESS OWNERS

By Frances Sharpe

If you think you're at a disadvantage as a female entrepreneur, think again. Dozens of organizations and programs have emerged in recent years to help women start and grow their own businesses. Taking advantage of the programs available can help you:

1. Obtain seed money to get your venture off the ground
2. Network with other women business owners
3. Win bids for government contracts
4. Find additional resources to assist you in starting or growing a venture

Action Steps

The best contacts and resources to help you get it done:

✓ Locate a program Whether you're seeking a loan to expand your business, looking for discounts on business services, or hoping to find a mentor who can help you launch a new venture, there's a program for you.

I recommend: Check Entrepreneur Magazine's list of private programs and government-sponsored programs for women.

✓ Show me the money If you're in need of cold, hard cash, you're in luck. Several programs provide women with seed money, micro loans, and even loans of up to $250,000.

I recommend: Download an application for a loan of $500 to $10,000 from 'Count Me In' or find out how to apply for up to $45,000 in financing at 'Make Mine a $Million Business'. Learn how the SBA's Pre-qualification Loan Program allows women and minorities to pre-qualify for a 7(a) loan up to a maximum of $250,000 before going to a bank.

✓ Make the mentoring and networking connection Finding a mentor can increase your confidence and give you the knowledge you need to start a business. Networking can be equally invaluable as a way to promote and build your business.

I recommend: Find a mentor at the National Women's Business Center or at SCORE. Ladies who Launch is a women business owner's networking organization specializing in small business incubators and workshops for its 25,000 members. Can't make it to a networking meeting in your area? Make connections with other entrepreneurial women online at Womenowned.com.

✓ Do business with Uncle Sam As a woman business owner, you actually have a leg up on the competition when bidding on lucrative federal contracts. However, before you can bid, you need to get certified as a woman-owned business.

I recommend: Discover the ins and outs of doing business with the federal government at Womenbiz.gov and download an application to get certified as a women business enterprise at the National Women Business Owner Corporation.
Get access to more business resources Starting and running a business doesn't require a Ph.D., but the more you know about business ownership, the better your chances of succeeding. Take advantage of the many programs available that offer resources to improve your know-how.

I recommend: Check out programs that really make the grade with a variety of educational and other resources, such as the SBA Women's Business Centers and NAWBO (National Association of Women Business Owners).

Tips & Tactics
Helpful advice for making the most of this Guide

- Don't feel like you're taking a 'hand-out' by applying for a loan or using resources geared for women. If you don't take advantage of them, another woman business owner will.

- Before you join every women's organization you come across, take a little time to determine which ones will best help you achieve your goals.