

Mary's clients & colleagues sing her praises

Mary was instrumental in getting my company, Exhibit Resources, certified with WBENC. As a result I've closed deals with Volvo Trucks, GlaxoSmithKline, Johnson & Johnson, PEPSI and am currently in the bid process with two other Fortune 500 companies. The certification does not guarantee business, but it opens the door to connect with the appropriate marketing managers and present our capabilities. The majority of my marketing efforts in 2003 will focus on companies that support supplier/diversity initiatives.

Lana Calloway - Raleigh, NC

I met Mary Cantando in 1996 and through my association with her I've been able to build my own business beyond what I ever imagined it could be. Mary Cantando is the real deal. Believe it.

Marty Clarke - Raleigh, NC

I know this woman. She walks the walk.

Mindy Goodfriend - Carlisle, MA

Mary is a tremendous advocate for entrepreneurs!

LaRae Kunz - Scottsdale, AZ

I have known Mary for five years and during this time have been impressed by her success as an entrepreneur and her dedication to women in business. She has worked tirelessly to help other women to run successful businesses. Wherever there is activity supporting women business owners you can be sure Mary is in the midst of it making it happen.

Louise Collis - Raleigh, NC

Mary has been instrumental in helping us meet the right people at some of the higher profile companies we traditionally have had difficulty approaching. We have cultivated a number of new high profile clients who may not have considered us without the WBENC Certification. Mary was the driving force in streamlining the certification process for Women Owned businesses in North Carolina.

Karen Hammes - Raleigh, NC

I met Mary in 1989 and found her to be one of the most passionate people on the planet. Mary has managed, taught and mentored women throughout her career, so it comes as no surprise that she has developed a business dedicated to helping women business owners succeed. In short, Mary Cantando is a force of nature.

Cara Lewis - Cary, NC



When Mary Cantando submitted her application to The Fast 50, Fast Company magazine's "worldwide search for ordinary people doing extraordinary things," she had no idea what she would unleash. Mary's article, featured online at

Fast Company's website, inspired women business owners around the country. Read Mary's entry alongside a sampling of the wonderful outpouring of responses from women business owners, both Fast Company readers as well as Mary's own clients and colleagues.



I Bring Women Entrepreneurs to the Table with Fortune Companies

Tell us what you do and the specific challenge you faced?

Millions of women have jumped on the entrepreneur track. Yet most of these women-led businesses struggle to make the leap from fairly successful to great. A long-time entrepreneur myself, I've lain awake untold nights agonizing that my business was tied to just a few key customers. As a small company, how could I open the door to large Fortune accounts? Then I discovered a side door. I was astonished to learn that companies like Johnson & Johnson, IBM and Bank of America have diversity procurement departments dedicating million of dollars to find nationally certified women-owned vendors. Could certification be a way for women entrepreneurs to finally get to the table with Fortune companies? The more I researched the idea, the bigger it became. I decided to take the plunge. I started a consulting business focused exclusively on helping women-led businesses understand and capitalize on certification.

Swell of support from across the country

This article is dead on. WBENC certification is a great way for women business owners to gain access to major corporate accounts.

Julie Garella - Charlotte, NC

WBENC certification has opened corporate doors that would otherwise have remained closed. Former roadblocks have been cleared for business successes since achieving our certification.

Sharon Olzerowicz - Rochelle Park, NJ

I recently heard Mary speak at a conference and was further inspired by her sponsorship of WBENC as a step toward equalizing the playing field of commerce.

Susan Porter - Charlotte, NC

My company was recently certified. It was a lot of work to pull together all the necessary information. But, it was a great accomplishment when we received the certificate in the mail. I think it's great that Mary is working to help women owned businesses through this process.

Alyce Kullas - Bridgewater, MA

I have been a WBENC certified organization since 1999. All such certifications are important building blocks in establishing a presence with customers who would otherwise dismiss the opportunity to do business with small women-owned businesses. Thanks for spreading the word.

Joanne Peterson - Pittsburgh, PA

Very Impressive - we need more women like Mary. Don't you think if we had more women in powerful positions that the world certainly wouldn't be in the state that it is in?

Sandie Payzant-Gordon - Oak Ridges, Ontario, Canada

Sounds like a woman on a great mission! Cut through the paperwork, Mary! We need more help like yours.

Kathy Eshelman - Columbus, OH

I will be looking up the web site that was suggested in this article to start the process of becoming certified myself. What a find! Thank you for a valuable tip.

Judy Lawton - San Diego, CA

Mary's company is right on the mark. And her dedication to promoting certification and mentoring women business owners is invaluable. She is absolutely a FAST50 leader.

Kathryn Wood - St. Louis, MO

It's long over due! Great idea!

Joy Guyer - Bluffton SC

One day we will look in the pages of "Women Who Helped Women Make History" and Mary's picture will be there - in color. She is a very committed person, expects the best from you, and gives the best to you.

Lorraine Stephens - Raleigh, NC

Thanks to Mary I've learned about the national certification process and with her help, MRPP is now a nationally certified company. This has resulted in my connection with other women business owners as well as major companies with diversity procurement initiatives. She is truly one woman working to help other women.

Sheila Hale Ogle - Cary, NC

Some 10 years ago, I met Mary Cantando at a Council for Entrepreneurial Development (CED) function. Within minutes I knew Mary was one of the most dynamic women I had ever met. She's a type triple-A personality with more passion in her little pinky than most people muster up in their entire life. She uses this passion to encourage others to stand tall and move forward...helping them with her creativity, her contacts, and her joyful love of life. Watch out world, Mary (CAN-DO) Cantando has a mission to win and she's taking like-minded women entrepreneurs with her.

Joyce Shevelev-Putzer - Raleigh, NC

I have been working with Mary Cantando for six months. She is absolutely committed to helping women succeed. I feel certain that I will be able to achieve my 5-year plan in half the time because of our strategy sessions!

Karen Banks - Greensboro, NC

I am a client of Mary Cantando's and working with her has made my longtime dreams for my company become a reality! After years of hard work and struggle to break into the fortune accounts, Mary has, in a just few short months, helped me secure the largest corporate account we've ever had, Yum! Brands and are currently bidding on several others. Mary's approach to growing businesses is revolutionizing my own!

Beverly Greene - Charlotte, NC

In over 10 years of working with Mary, I have consistently been impressed with her ability to spot opportunity and drive action. So, when it comes to creating "real" value for women entrepreneurs, no one could do it better. You've got my vote!

Sherry Wells - Raleigh, NC

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What was your moment of truth?

The idea that certification could be a transformational sales strategy for women entrepreneurs hit me hard when I attended the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) conference. (WBENC is a five-year-old national certification organization.) My goal was to find out if certification was just window dressing or a real opportunity. The moment of truth came when I asked the national procurement director of a Fortune 500 financial services firm, "Of the certified women-owned businesses who apply to be a vendor, what percentage do you wind up working with?" His answer: 80 percent. It was like an explosion in my head. The opportunity was bigger than I could have imagined. And it shocked me that so few women entrepreneurs were aware of it. Out of the 170,000 women-owned businesses in my home state of North Carolina, only 40 were certified. I made it my mission to get the word out.

What were the results?

As a first step, I founded The Carolina Forum, an organization sponsored by North and South Carolina corporations with diversity procurement goals. The Forum brings together certified businesses and the diversity procurement directors seeking them out. But the biggest news is that I've proven the idea WORKS. In just a few months, I've helped entrepreneurs become certified and land large Fortune accounts such as GlaxoSmithKline, Volvo Trucks and YUM! – breakthroughs that for these women represent the culmination of years of struggle and hard work. For me, it represents the culmination of my dreams – to be able to make a significant difference in the lives of women entrepreneurs.

What's your parting tip?

If your business is >50% woman owned, investigate certification at www.wbenc.org. It opens doors you wouldn't have believed possible.

"Absolute Abundance for Women Business Owners"

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As a women entrepreneur, and the owner of a certified business, I truly understand the value of Mary's efforts.

Mary Beth Woodin - New York, NY

Although I haven't worked with Mary, having been in this situation several times, I can say that there is incredible value in what she does. If only my current company were 50+ percent woman owned!

Nancy Roecker - Denver, CO

As an accountant, I see many clients who can benefit from certification, but are intimidated by the process. Mary provides such an important service to women entrepreneurs that can only lead to the growth of their businesses.

Linda Hamilton - New York, NY

Mary is clearly committed to entrepreneurship and better business for all. I strongly support her selection for Fast 50.

Belinda B. May - St. Louis, MO

A worthy endeavor to wake up corporate America.

Sheri Orlowitz - Washington, DC

What a great idea to be able to bring in the passion of helping women entrepreneurs succeed into a thriving business.

Jaimee Wolf - Ft. Lauderdale, FL

This is an eye opening story - it's great to know that someone in my geographic area is promoting certification for women owned businesses. It seems that this can help give women owned businesses that extra edge to success.

Kathy Hughes - Raleigh, NC

I am currently working on my certification. I know it will give me a jump up on the competition.

Sharon Young - Pittsburgh, PA

I am going through the certification process right now and know how important Mary's efforts are. Thanks for helping to spread the good word, Mary!!

Sharon Kotler - New York, NY

I've forwarded this entry information to other women running their own businesses. Taking advantage of opportunity is what it's all about.

Marty Avery - Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Good for you Mary! You made what was appeared to be impossible possible. You go girl!!

Denise Haney - Phoenix, AZ

I didn't realize what a powerful tool certification via WBENC could be. Thanks, Mary!!

Georgiana Riley - Pittsburgh, PA