

# DAILY NEWS

## Certified to win: City's minority and women-owned businesses turn government biz into profits

**MWBEs capitalize on government programs to chase contracts, but certification is not a guarantee of success**

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**Tamara Nall of The Leading Niche. The company derives 90% of its revenues from federal contracts.**

Tamara Nall's Harlem-based data analysis and IT consulting firm, The Leading Niche, is on a fast track.

Launched in 2007, the company has grown its employee ranks from four to 31 in just the last two years.

Nall's biggest customer: Uncle Sam.

Some 90% of The Leading Niche's revenues come from federal government contracts. Nall, 39, has no fewer than five government certifications identifying The Leading Niche as a minority-owned, women-owned, and/or small business.

The designations have helped her open doors to opportunities that she otherwise might not have been able to access. Once

she landed government clients, and proved herself, others followed.

"We have every certification you can imagine," Nall told a roomful of multicultural small business owners last week who came to learn about government contracting at the Trade Brooklyn business conference.

"For me, it's been very helpful."

Savvy New York City entrepreneurs like Nall are turning not-so-sexy government work into hot profits.

The federal government and New York State set aside a certain portion of their procurement for disadvantaged businesses. Likewise, New York City sets diversity goals for specific types of contracts such as construction, legal services and trucking.

Lately, government at all levels has been stepping up efforts to give minority business owners a hand.



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**Juan Perez (r.) leads a panel discussion on getting certified at the Trade Brooklyn trade show.**

Last year, New York City passed Local Law 1. The new law eliminates what had been a \$1 million cap on the type of government contracts that count towards the city's diversity goals.

That means minority and women-owned businesses can use their designation to compete for much bigger deals.

"The pool of contracts has gone from \$400 million to \$2 billion," Gregg Bishop, deputy commissioner, business development division at the city's Department of Small Business Services (SBS), told the Daily News.

Since 2008, when the city launched its Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) program, the number of certified city businesses has ballooned from 700 to 3,764.

"We are committed to dramatically increasing that number," SBS Commissioner Maria Torres-Springer told the News.

Getting certified is no guarantee of success.

In 2012, less than 25% of certified firms actually won city contracts, according to a study conducted by the Manhattan Borough President's office.

The winners set themselves apart by connecting with programs and services offered by the city and then using those skills and connections to chase down deals.

Last year Danny Pretto, the owner of Staten Island-based Safeco Construction, participated in the city's Bond Readiness program.

We have every certification you can imagine

The course teaches construction companies how to access bonds, which are required by the city.

Afterward, Pretto was able to secure a \$4 million bond - and about \$8 million worth of city construction contracts.

"You have to give blood, sweat and tears to get bondable," Pretto said. "It was definitely worth it."

Getting certified and doing business with the government isn't easy. Companies should expect to be heavily vetted. There are big capital requirements.

"From the time you apply for a contract to the time you are awarded a contract could take 12 to 18 months," said Candace Waterman, chief of staff at the Women's Business Enterprise National Council.

It took some time for Brooklyn-based multicultural marketing firm Highbrid Media to get up to speed on nailing government work, said Juan Perez, the company's CEO.

But now Highbrid is making tracks.

This year, 25% of the firm's business will come from government clients including CUNY, which has tapped Highbrid to help recruit minority students.

"It's all about planning and being smart about contracting," Perez said. "It's a huge way to grow our revenues."