

Global Connections

Relationship-Building Over Breakfast

Canadian WBEs engage with corporations in unique format.

By Susan Baka

“Totally brilliant” is how one participant describes the very successful Breakfast with Brands™ (BWB) program of Canadian certification council, **WBE Canada** (www.wbe-canada.org), that brings together women business enterprises (WBEs) and corporate members by sector in a more intimate setting to explore building business relationships. The program started in 2014 as a breakfast session sponsored by **The Kellogg Company** prior to the **Women’s Business Enterprise National Council’s** (WBENC) conference in Pennsylvania, “the name was even trademarked at the suggestion of **Barbara Oliver**, publisher of *MBE* magazine,” recalls **Mary Anderson**, president of WBE Canada. That fueled the development of a robust series that’s been taken to subsequent WBENC events and across Canada, demonstrating what countries outside the U.S. are doing to engage and connect diverse suppliers.

Themed by sector (technology, financial services, auto, etc.) and hosted by a select group of related corporations and organizations, each event has a similar framework—short presentations from the corporate members about how to do business with them, followed by a facilitated and rotating roundtable format in which WBEs can ask in-depth questions and introduce themselves in a more intimate setting. This environment resonates with both WBEs and the corporate members.

“The quality of contacts is impressive and saves you from having to drill down five people in a corporation to find the right one because they are all at the breakfast session,” says **Michelle White**, president, **Today Living Group**, and newly-certified, who participated in the financial services BWB.

Format spurs connections

According to Anderson, BWB is a program that offers insights about an industry cluster and is a means to create knowledge about supplier diversity and procurement practices in different parts of Canada. “There is an intimacy of connections because we keep it small with those who affect buying decisions,” she explains. For WBEs, it is a place to learn the practices of corporations and public entities more clearly. The framework also offers those who are newer to the network a means to connect with other certified suppliers and identify potential synergies for collaboration. “It is an opportunity to build business acumen, personal and professional connections, and is a good way to make a lasting impression with decision makers in corporations.”

And that’s exactly what is happening. When **Julie Ricketts Daniel**, then senior manager, Procurement, (now director, Real Estate Performance Management), **Bell Canada**,



Ricketts Daniel

participated in the telecom and technology BWB last fall, she met several suppliers who can be considered for future bidding opportunities with the telecom giant. “They are front of mind now because of the good quality discussions,” she says. “A focused session like this allows everyone to make inroads. As corporates, we get to know key suppliers in our space and can communicate what they are all about throughout our companies.”

Michael Bourne, senior manager, Procurement Business Operations, Policies, Ombudsman, Diversity & Compliance Engineering, **IBM Canada**—a founding corporate member of WBE Canada and participant in two BWBs—agrees. “It provides a concentrated forum to meet with suppliers in our industry to help us understand what makes them tick, share insights about how corporate procurement works, and give them direction.”



Bourne

Anderson emphasizes this is precisely the intent. “BWB is not business matching to create final business but rather an opportunity to court for business development.” Bourne acknowledges that WBEs may not see immediate deals but wants to help them understand that, if there are no opportunities today, there may be a fit down the road. “I also encourage them to look to the right and to the left at the table because sometimes it’s easier to deal WBE to WBE to win business rather than trying to grab a corporation. This may actually be a better fit for them in some circumstances.” Success with other WBEs is exactly what soon-to-be-certified WBE **Lisa Siragusa**, president of **NRG TeleResources**, who attended the telecom and technology BWB, is experiencing. “First and foremost, I go to position myself in front of corporations, but it’s also important to connect with other WBEs and engage in business transactions with them. I see a quicker response that way and have done more business with them.”

Breakfast with Brands™: What WBEs Say



Michelle White, President
Today Living Group Inc.
Toronto, Ontario
www.todaylivinggroup.com

Business: Full-service property management leasing company designed for the condo owner

Attended: Financial Services BWB, Nov 2015

Expectation: "In our business, which is corporate housing, our bread and butter

is financial institutions, but we don't have them all as clients yet. I wanted to make more connections."

Results: "I recognize that it takes time to land a client, but dialogue with the participating banks has started, so we are pleased with that."

Biggest Value: "Definitely the exposure to corporate people and networking opportunities with them and other WBEs is invaluable. Networking is like peeling an onion—you have to work hard to find the key people to speak to and that can take months. Yet they were all there at this event. That's amazing!"

Svetlana Sidenko, President
IT Chapter
Montreal, Quebec
www.itchapter.com



Business: Experts in information technology, including consulting and conducting accredited IT training sessions.

Attended: Telecom & Technology BWB, Oct 2015

Expectation: "I wanted to get access to decision makers in IT."
Results: IT Chapter has presented a proposal to a WBE met at the event.

Biggest Value: "I met people who can lead us to decision makers for our services. I also connected with other WBEs who may become partners. The value is definitely there and we intend to push it further."

Lisa Siragusa, President
NRG TeleResources
Winnipeg, Manitoba
www.nrgtelesources.com



Business: Distributor of headsets, audio conferencing equipment, and phone voice recording devices

Attended: Telecom & Technology BWB, Oct 2015, and Financial Services BWB, Nov 2015

Expectation: "I learned about these events at a WBE Canada national conference and wanted the opportunity to expand both personally and professionally.

Breakfast with Brands piqued my interest."

Results: NRG is in contact with two technology-based corporate attendees.

Biggest Value: "It's good to understand procurement processes because they're all a little different. Being able to speak to appropriate decision makers who can make things happen gives me the opportunity to position myself and better market my products and services. I especially like the one-on-one interactions in the smaller setting rather than large conferences which can be overwhelming."

Value for all

Another testament to the value of BWB is that the Halifax-based **Centre for Women in Business**—one of WBE Canada's partners—has hosted three highly rated sessions in eastern Canada, with two more scheduled this spring. "Business owners don't often get the opportunity to attend events like this where those who can affect the deal are present," says Executive Director **Tanya Priske**. "Workshops are typically skills focused and, while BWB helps build those skills, this is where the rubber hits the pavement." It comes back to relationship building. "Showing up is one of the best things WBEs can do for their business to learn the core values and cultures of their targeted companies and get personal introductions in a setting where they have the direct attention of the corporates."

Priske finds the Centre's participation equally valuable. "It increases our knowledge and allows us to work more effectively with our WBEs. The relationship we build with corporates is priceless." For Ricketts Daniel, another value is connecting with other telecom companies about their supplier diversity initiatives. "I find this very helpful since Bell is in the early days of implementing its program."

These connections that BWB has nurtured is the greatest measure of success, notes Anderson. "Because our goal is facilitating an intimacy of connections, we survey participants to find out about the follow up with corporations and others. We are starting to create metrics and take a continual pulse

to refine our programming." What she is most proud of is having developed a more in-depth cluster group and collaborative outreach across Canada, including BWBs that are hosted by regional partners and public entities and encourage the participation of other diverse suppliers. This inclusive approach will continue.

With BWB serving as a great touchpoint to share knowledge garnered over time in different ways, it's no wonder that WBEs recommend the program. "Absolutely!" emphasizes Siragusa. "It not only gives you the opportunity to speak to the right people within corporations, but the camaraderie within WBE Canada is fabulous. Feeding off the energy of other WBEs motivates me and confirms I'm moving in the right direction to grow my business!"

For a schedule of upcoming BWB programs, visit www.wbecanada.org. ♦

Susan Baka, president of Bay Communications & Marketing Inc. (www.baycomm.ca), specializes in helping corporations, governments, and associations attain leadership positions in niche areas such as diversity and entrepreneurship by developing strategies and communication vehicles that resonate with their target audiences. Her firm was one of the first 10 certified as a woman business enterprise in Canada.

