Creating Opportunities for Professional Service Firms

Professional service industries constitute the fastest growing portion of our economy and are a significant contributor to high-wage employment. Most professional services opportunities are obtained through relationships with senior leaders within a company, rather than traditional purchasing channels. They are often overlooked by supplier diversity professionals, and as a result of long-standing exclusive relationships, minority professional service firms remain substantially underutilized by corporations, foundations and educational institutions.

Supplier diversity professionals can embrace a number of best practices to help minority professional service firms gain access to opportunities:

- Conduct a company-wide audit to determine which service categories lack minority firm participation.
- Learn the language and culture of the service industry. If the desired services are in the legal arena, obtain a basic understanding of legalese. If it is money management, learn the investment strategy of the company and core competencies of the firms. Find the experts, ask the questions, and read industry periodicals.
- Educate potential minority firms on the nuances of how business is conducted within your company. Assist with navigating through relationships and cultivating a business partnership.
- Encourage senior leaders at your company to refer minority firms to their counterparts at other organizations.
- Leverage internal resources to integrate practices throughout the company.

As the Director of Business Diversity for the University of Chicago, I am the first point of entry for many firms. Understanding the jargon and cultural mores of an industry helps me effectively communicate a firm’s qualifications to University leadership. I need to have just enough knowledge about the firm’s business to get them into the room. Then minority firms can directly market their services to key decision makers throughout the University. Building these relationships takes patience and effort. At the University, we are building sustainable partnerships with minority professional service firms one relationship at a time.

The Coca-Cola Company is the world’s largest producer, distributor, and marketer of nonalcoholic beverages and has championed supplier diversity for more than 30 years. Under the present leadership of Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Muhtar Kent, we continue our commitment to supplier diversity. Our policy and mission are clear: to maximize procurement opportunities for minority- and women-owned businesses (MWBEs) by proactively seeking qualified suppliers, building partnerships with, and purchasing from MWBEs.

In this regard, we strive to be a leader in supplier diversity and a model corporate citizen in the local communities we serve. We believe including our customers and consumers in our purchasing strategy will help develop stronger local communities, create long-term growth, and a marketplace advantage for the Company.

At The Coca-Cola Company, supplier diversity is a key business strategy. It is integrated into our business routines and is a major consideration in the sourcing of new suppliers, expanding business with existing suppliers, and supporting our customers in their business development and supplier diversity efforts. As a result, we have significantly increased spending with MWBEs and our supplier diversity profile has grown substantially in actual dollars expended, as well as wide global recognition in South Africa, China, United Kingdom and Australia.

Supplier development is key to the success of the MWBEs with whom we do business. We have a very successful mentoring program that is directed toward enhancing the capability and capacity of MWBEs to increase opportunities and competitiveness within the Company and with other corporations. Critical to the success of this program is the dedication and participation of executives and managers as mentors.

We are committed to establishing and maintaining relationships with suppliers who share our vision and resolve to supplier diversity. It is from this commitment that we have developed a strong second tier program which requires our prime suppliers to engage MWBEs on Coca-Cola contracts and projects. We also encourage joint ventures, strategic alliances, and other business relationships that afford continuous opportunities, innovation, and growth for our MWBEs partners and our Company.