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NEWSMAKER

She lends a hand by lending an ear to small businesses

By **Natalie Myers**
PBN Staff Writer

In the 14 years Sherri Carrera has served the small-business community, she just about has heard it all. Issues have ranged from the routine, such as someone needing a phone number for a Chamber of Commerce, to the outright panic of a struggling business needing an immediate loan.

In 2005, she started working for Every Company Counts (ECC), the small-business initiative at the R.I. Economic Development Corporation. She's part of a team that has served about 3,000 small businesses and has been a driving force behind new initiatives such as We Mean Business, which aims to make navigating through permit, license and regulatory processes easier. She's expanded the ECC staff to include a bilingual account manager for the growing number of Latino business owners. She also has added a mid-market account manager for small businesses with as many as 50 employees.

In a recent interview with Providence Business News she discussed new ECC initiatives and some of the challenges and solutions for small-business owners.

PBN: Why was We Mean Business created?

CARRERA: It's very time consuming for a business owner to find out how many rules and regulations there are, to find the right contact person, so we decided to put everyone in one room [for the first We Mean Business Expo last month]. And it was really successful. We had over 400 business owners walk through the doors. We got some great feedback.

PBN: What kind of feedback?

CARRERA: Surprisingly, a lot of [the businesses] needed marketing, so we have our first post-We Mean Business follow-up workshop Jan. 23 with David Nash. He's going to be doing a marketing class.

PBN: What is it about marketing that small businesses struggle with?

CARRERA: I think because they're small, there may be only two or three people on staff. They don't have the knowledge that the bigger firms do, that have a whole marketing department. From speakers like David Nash they can learn a couple of things that can maybe help their business, whether it's a Web site, direct mail or just keeping in touch with your clients.

PBN: What is the next step for We Mean Business?

CARRERA: There's a group called The Sassy Ladies and we're going to be highlighting a different woman entrepreneur every month. That was a connection from the expo ... We have the brown-bag lunch series that we're going to continue with cities and towns. We're going to Foster in January. That was another connection from We Mean Business ... We're going to go up there and do a little seminar and listen to the business owners but also interact with the local city and town employees and the town council.

PBN: Are these cities and towns interested in economic development?

CARRERA: Especially in Foster, that's why Foster wants us to go up. They want to create a business community. There are very few businesses up there. They want to see ... how we can help them. It may be as simple as letting a client know that there's space available in Foster or there could be a special loan program or sidewalk improvements.

PBN: What is the goal or concept behind the brown-bag lunch series?

CARRERA: Basically we listen to their issues. The fire code issue is really hot. ... Our very first one was in the town of North Providence. It was amazing. We had the fire chief, police chief, town clerk ... [The first one was] probably a year ago. We've done about six cities and towns.

PBN: Are there any solutions that could ease small-business challenges on a broad scale?

CARRERA: On a broad scale with the regulations ... I review all the proposals and regulations ... that impact small businesses ... with the Regulatory Flexibility Act it actually gives them a voice ... it's a federal law but we adapted it to state law as well ... Reg Flex was enacted in 2004 so that's not so old. So getting the processes in place and educating the small-business community that there is a vehicle for them to voice their opinions takes time. Obviously the fire codes since 2003 has been a huge issue.



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SHERRI CARRERA said that the cost of putting sprinklers up to comply with fire codes is still a problem for small businesses.

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PBN: How is that going? Are you still getting calls from business owners? What is the problem with complying with the fire codes?

CARRERA: It's the cost of putting the sprinklers up ... we have some financing programs that can help: the micro-loan program and then there are our partnerships with the SBA and other lending institutions.

PBN: How specifically do ECC services help small-business owners?

CARRERA: It helps small businesses just to actually be an advocate and listen to what their needs are. And I find that sometimes it's an issue that maybe we can't solve. But the business owner is just happy to have someone that will listen to them. And especially with the fire codes, I get a lot of small-business owners that will call, and it's just really important to have a live person at the other end of the phone. And hopefully we can get them to the right connection and the right person to get help, whether it's a loan or their local councilman. •

Interview: Sherri Carrera

Position: Manager of Small Business Services for the R.I. Economic Development Corporation.

Background: Carrera started her career at the R.I. Office of the Secretary of State in 1993 after a marketing internship at Ross-Simons, the Providence-based jewelry retailer. In the Secretary of State's Office, Carrera worked in constituent services; toward the end of her 12-year stint, she became deputy director of the office's First Stop Business Information Center. She held that title for a year and a half before taking a position as operations manager for Every Company Counts, the small-business initiative at the RIEDC, in 2005. She became manager of small-business services about four months ago.

Education: B.S. in marketing and advertising, Rhode Island College, 1992

Residence: Providence

Age: 38

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