

Certification Assistance and Coaching Services for Diverse Business Owners



Heather Cox
Co-Founder & COO

Certify My Company (CMC) provides certification assistance and coaching services to diverse business owners to help navigate the arduous process of becoming certified as a Women Business Enterprise (WBE), Minority Business Enterprise (MBE), or LGBT Business Enterprise (LGBTBE), Small Business Association (SBA) 8A, Veteran Owned (VA), Disabled/ Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE), and state/city level certifications.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Ms. Cox, what is the concept at Certify My Company?

Ms. Cox: The concept of CMC is to be an advocate for the women, minority LGBT, veteran, disabled and overall diverse business community, and educate these businesses on the most effective strategies to maximize their status as a diverse business. We also support the corporations that these companies want to sell to, and we act as a liaison between the two communities.

CEOCFO: Where are some of the greatest problems, challenges and misconceptions?

Ms. Cox: I would say the greatest challenges, problems and misconceptions probably start with the certification process itself. So many people do not go through the certification process, despite being asked by their (Fortune 1000) clients have asked them to get certified. The primary reason people give for not getting certified is a lack of

time. These are busy business owners and certification is a very detailed process that is not instantly gratifying. Some of the information in there may be unfamiliar and is extremely sensitive. If a vendor does not go through the formal certification process, the corporations cannot report them as certified, reportable spend. Another part of the education that we do is internally in the corporations themselves. The procurement department and supplier diversity departments do not always function together. Sometimes, it is a matter of educating the procurement professionals on the benefits of using diverse businesses. We are all human, and change is not one of our favorite things. If we are to make those changes, it has to be for a good reason. Education changes the outlook of why using a diverse owned business is beneficial to them, to the company and to the economy as a whole.

CEOCFO: Are there certain minority communities you deal with that are more affected or have more of a problem? Do you see a distinction and do you work to overcome that distinction or are all minorities in the same boat when it comes to the process and the challenges?

Ms. Cox: Certification overcomes many challenges. I do not feel like one diverse community has more challenges as far as getting their foot in the door. When it comes down to it, they are all business owners. I would say it is less about the actual diverse group they are a part of and more about the industry they are in. If you are certified and you are using your certification, meaning you are going to the events and registered on the portals and making the relationship, you are doing everything you can.

CEOCFO: Where does Certify My Company come in? Walk us through an engagement with a client on either end of the spectrum.

Ms. Cox: We will start with the client on the vendor side – the business owner side. Often times the introduction is made through the vendor's corporate client, usually via email or a conference call. First, we interview them to make sure they actually are eligible. We do not work with any company that is not 100 percent eligible for certification. We then help them decide the best certifications for their business. You could spend your whole life and your whole bank account getting certified; there are thousands of certifications out there, but that is not the path I usually recommend for clients. I usually recommend to strategically identify the certifications that will work best for them and their business. We then work with them to collect the documentation and make sure the documentation is accurate. The biggest reason people are denied certification is not because they are not eligible, but because the documentation does not accurately reflect the true way their company runs. We audit the documentation, help them package it, and our in-house council reviews the legal

documents to ensure there are not going to be any problems down the line of the certification process. We assist them with their online application and submit their application through our proprietary process. Then, we follow up with them until they get the go ahead for a site visit. Once certification is granted, we work with them to maximize their certification. The certification itself it a one size fits all in a sense, but how you use your certification is very specific to the business, the business owner and the industry that they are in.

CEOCFO: *How do your potential customers find you? Are there many companies that assist in that certification process?*

Ms. Cox: Certify My Company is the only certification assistance provider that uses its proprietary process to ensure our high rate of certification success. Our in-house council is one of our differentiators. We are nationwide, and we are known across the Fortune 1,000 world as the experts in certification. People usually find us through their client companies, whether it be a Fortune 1,000 or a prime suppliers. Sometimes prime suppliers have contractual obligations to utilize diverse vendors. By getting current, eligible vendors certified they can utilize the vendors already in place. We are asked to speak chamber of commerce or a women in business or minorities is business events. I sit on the board of different organizations, and I was part of the Super Bowl Advisory Council for the Super Bowl 2014. I sit on the Membership and Marketing committees for WBENC, so we involved in a lot of different places to make sure that we are first of all, on the pulse of what is happening, and that we are known. Satisfied customers' word of mouth referrals are our strongest source of growth. You do not know that you need us until you need us.

CEOCFO: *Do the certification requirements tend to change frequently or do they tend to stay in place for any given industry for quite a while?*

Ms. Cox: Certification requirements tend to stay constant because really what they are certifying is that the company is owned, operated and controlled by that diverse person or persons. Some of the state or federal certifications have a personal net worth component in addition to the diversity aspect. But in general the requirements are consistent.

“Certify My Company can help make introductions, bring inroads and expedite the use of your diversity certification, which can be an invaluable use of your time and money.”

- Heather Cox

CEOCFO: *How do you work with corporations?*

Ms. Cox: For Fortune 1,000 corporations, we are their resource for their minority vendors that they have a relationship with, love working with and really want to be able to continue using. With any relationship, both parties have to benefit from that relationship to keep it moving forward. Through educational webinars, seminars and workshops as well as direct outreach we inform and develop these suppliers. Additionally, we work with procurement teams and internal stakeholders to discuss the values and benefits of diversity and certification. As corporations develop their supplier diversity program, education and effective implementation are crucial. These educational programs generate inquiries. They provide the he procurement team with comfort in the basic knowledge to speak to their vendors and constituent stakeholders more comfortably about minority vendors and certification. They are not going to be experts, but they should have a basic knowledge of how to talk about it. Corporations and government entities need proof of certification. Certify My Company reaches out to those vendors, to verify certification or eligibility for certification. We offer assistance with the certification process and we can also source new vendors. If there is a need for very niche, certified business, in a specific category or industry or in specific area, we will help them locate vendors to fulfill that need.

CEOCFO: *Do you find that most companies, aside from the challenges of certifying, want to be known as a women-owned business or LGBT business? Is that not always the case and do people sometimes feel it is not helpful for them to be portrayed that way?*

Ms. Cox: All of the certifications were founded as a way to mitigate the risk for the corporations who want to do business with diverse businesses. There are a million reasons to do business with diverse businesses, and if you are identifying yourself as a minority-owned company, you need to prove it. Sometimes, business owners will say they do not want to get business just because they are women or minority. I guarantee you will never get business just because you are a woman. I repeat... you will never get business because you are a woman or part of the LGBT community. You have to be just as good as any of your competitors. If you happen to also be a certified woman owned business or LGBT owned business, that is going to be the differentiator, set you apart. Additionally, certification offers opportunities for introductions that your competitors may not have, face-to-face time at conferences with the people who are going to buy your services. Face to face time is invaluable! No matter how many times you email and call them, face to face will always trump digital or phone. You do not have to put the information on every business card and every marketing piece. You can definitely be specific of who you want it to go to. Put it on your website, so if somebody is looking for it, he or she can find it. Nowadays, at least in the world that I sit in, it is not going to be negatively portrayed. I have never seen it negatively affect a business; I have only seen it positively affect them.

CEOCFO: *What is the feeling these days about the whole diversity concept in general?*

Ms. Cox: People always ask us what the corporations get, out of using diverse suppliers. They usually assume it is mostly good PR. It is not bad PR to have a diversity program, but there is so much more involved. Diverse owned businesses represent different communities, which bring in different thought processes, ideas and ways to do business in various communities. As humans we tend to continue to do things the same way, especially if we are surrounded by people who are all the same as us. Bringing in new ideas, communities and viewpoints creates new ideas and new visions. When a minority, women or LGBT owned company is awarded a big project, they are more likely to hire from within their own community. That means that another person now has more disposable income. Versus a larger corporation, which would be less likely to hire somebody and simply up the workload of their current employees, which does not introduce new consumer into the marketplace. Wal-Mart is part of the Billion Dollar Round Table, which means that they spend a billion dollars or more a year with certified women and/or minority owned companies. They know that by hiring diverse suppliers, those diverse suppliers are now hiring people from within their communities, Wal-Mart benefits from new customers. It is good for the bottom line of the corporations. Communities like the LGBT community are especially loyal. If they know you are supporting their community, they will support you.

CEOCFO: *Why pay attention to Certify My Company? Why does the company stand out?*

Ms. Cox: People always ask me when I go to entrepreneurial events what my biggest piece of advice is for entrepreneurs. I would say outsource to experts whenever possible, because do-overs can be very expensive. You outsource your taxes, dental work and a lot of pieces of your company that you know need to be done right the first time. Your time is very valuable and it is important to utilize it effectively. Outsource it to somebody who knows the ins and outs of the diversity world that can then make suggestions on how to best utilize that certification so that you are not spinning in circles. Certify My Company can help make introductions, bring inroads and expedite the use of your diversity certification, which can be an invaluable use of your time and money.

BIO: Within small to medium sized businesses, Heather Cox is an accomplished sales and operations executive with over a decade of experience. Currently, she is Co-founder and COO of Certify My Company, a diversity consultancy. Heather, along with her co-founder, wanted to be able to help women, minority and LGBT business owners, that qualify; certify their businesses to become part of the ranks and privileges that certification brings. To those ends, Certify My Company was born with the goal of inspiring and helping diverse businesses grow while having more fun and time doing it.

Certify My Company provides the inspiration needed for business owners by helping them get their qualified businesses nationally certified, helping link them with large corporations and each other to increase revenue, connecting them to events and sharing expert knowledge and motivation.

Additionally, Certify My Company is the comprehensive resource for Corporate Diversity Managers to grow and reach their diversity goals. Heather and her team are in a unique position offering the opportunity to liaise between the corporations and their diversity vendors.

Heather's passion for supporting diverse vendors stretches beyond the walls of Certify My Company. She has been a part of the Steering Committee for the WPEO NY, a member of the WBENC Forum Marketing Committee, Co-Chair of the Each One Reach One Campaign, Served as Vice President of Diversity for the National Association of Women Business Owners and is a member of the Advisory Board for SuperBowl XLVIII.

On a more personal note, Heather is the mother of a 5 year old girl and a 3 year old boy. When she is not working with diversity business owners, she enjoys sharing not-so-quiet moments with her effervescent little ones. Her husband, number one fan, and partner in parenthood rounds out the edges of an entrepreneurial life. In addition, Heather tries to find time for yoga, running, boot-camp and baking. As a former acro-gymnast, tight rope walker and juggler, she finds exercise helps her balance her life. Heather earned her BA in Spanish Language from the University of Texas at Austin.



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