

CROSS-BORDER TRADE, NEW VISTAS IN IT

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Washington, DC – Dialogue on Diversity presented its annual entrepreneurship training conference on July 27th in a day-long series of seminars bringing into sharp focus, before a capacity audience of women entrepreneurs and professionals, a fresh aspect of the economic universe confronting women and minority entrepreneurs – the prospect of international trade. Appropriately, the conference venue was the International Trade Center at the Reagan building in central Washington. The ITC, acting as conference host, was joined by AT&T and Southwest Airlines as Conference sponsors. A few of many event highlights are noted below. A detailed Conference report will appear shortly in the Dialogue on Diversity Newsletter.

The midday session included the conferring of awards honoring three young women entrepreneurs. Jovita Carranza, a former Assistant Administrator at S.B.A., presented the plaques to the laureates: all very successful managers of quite different kinds of enterprises — Nhora Barrera-Murphy in a telecommunications firm focusing on health care provision, Gabriela Santamaria with a cutting edge human resources agency, and Melanie Lamar, who has formed and manages a crew of some 100 home-care workers tending many elderly and disabled persons in households around the Washington area.

The Conference 's tripartite topical approach – International Trade, Entrepreneurship, and Information Technology – brought together a roster of top-flight panelists, each dealing with an essential facet of the world of enterprise management. Information technology headed the agenda. Aaron Brauer-Rieke, of the Center for Democracy and Technology, spoke on the privacy conundrum for businesses collecting information on clients in the normal course – the small firm's primary shield is a written privacy policy. Dr. Roger Channing of Microtech conveyed the essential insights in the notion of "cloud computing", a form of pooling storage and processing functions among small, related groups of users (a private cloud), or a large population of unrelated users (public cloud). Very sophisticated and elaborate processing operations, way beyond the economic capacities of individual users, can be made feasible for the participating circle of users. Economies and efficiencies are thereby achieved, but at some cost in privacy risk. Joycelyn Tate, technology advisor to the Black Women's Roundtable, queried whether storage and processing costs in a high-tech pooling system would be manageable in the modest cash-flow circumstances constraining small firms.

Foreign trade seminar panelists laid out a roadmap for entry by small firms into the foreign trade realm. Dottie Li, of TransPacific Communications, presented an extensive disquisition, riveting the attention of an eager entrepreneurial audience, on the features of Chinese manners and culture that are likely to impact the conduct of business transactions with Chinese counterparts. Use formal titles, approach Chinese customers initially through a known intermediary – these are a few of the injunctions not likely to be sensed intuitively by common-sensical American business persons. Manuel A. Rosales, former S.B.A. official on hemispheric foreign trade, described in detail the canons for doing business in Latin America. Richard Ginsburg, of S.B.A., and Judith Rivera of Ex-Im Bank described their respective services in shepherding entrepreneurs through the rites of passage to the lucrative exporting life.

A segment on marketing and the quest for spots in the supply chains of mega companies and governmental agencies was chaired by Theresa Speake, who had been supplier diversity chief for the Department of Energy in the last Administration. Mauricio Vera, who presides over the Inter-Agency Council for supplier diversity in the federal agencies; and Denise Rodriguez-Lopez, former OSDBU head at DOT, now with her own consultant's office on supplier diversity problems; and Mauricio Gaitan of Howard University's small business study project all contributed analysis to the how-to content of the panel. Janice Greene of the Boeing company in the Seattle area was on hand to describe the supplier

diversity picture from the vantage point of this airplane manufacturing colossus – an army of vendors labor to furnish everything from office supplies to the countless intricately fabricated parts that go into a giant airliner. In a related topic Ana Harvey, Assistant Administrator at the S.B.A. for Women’s Business Ownership, described some of the trends in federal contracting preferences for disadvantaged firms under the “8(a)” program, the new women’s preferences, and, finally, HUB Zones. These geographically demarcated enclaves, defined by low income levels and economically depressed conditions, float as economic conditions change. The present map of HUB Zones differs significantly from a corresponding map of only several years ago.

Perhaps the most attentively followed agenda topic was access to capital, aired in a panel featuring bank representatives, a micro-finance expert, business counselors, and the chief Knowledge Officer, Ivonne Cunarro, of the Minority Business Development Agency, who recounted the findings of a number of studies filling out the profile of small and minority enterprise in America, Art Zelaya, business lending officer at PNC Bank in Washington, laid to the persistent languishing of business activity in the country the fact that banks have substantial cash reserves and relatively slim loan portfolios at this point. Potential borrowers, on the one hand, are not encouraged by business conditions to expand, and while banks have maintained their own standards for granting loans, the weakness of small firms’ cash flow numbers, and the destruction of value in securities and house values, massively diminishing available collateral, have effectively barred credit extension to very many borrowers.

About Dialogue on Diversity: Founded in 1991, Dialogue on Diversity, a §501(c)3 non-profit, is a national network of women entrepreneurs and professionals, actively promoting constructive dialogue among Latino and other ethnic and cultural communities, with especial emphasis on their economic viability through entrepreneurship – part of the promise of American economic strength in the 21st Century. Dialogue on Diversity’s cycle of public policy conferences and its annual entrepreneurship programs both celebrate and advance that promise.

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