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ALBERTA **WOMEN** ENTREPRENEURS

Realize Success

FOR 15 YEARS, ALBERTA WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS (AWE) has been reaching out to women across the province to help them achieve business success. The face of women-owned businesses has shifted dramatically over the years, but the organization has also evolved to meet their changing needs.

What has remained constant is AWE's role as a connection point, helping women entrepreneurs connect to whatever they need to succeed and help their business grow. It has supported these growing numbers of women entrepreneurs, celebrating their successes and recognizing the important contribution they make to the local economy and to the social fabric of our communities.

INSPIRATION

RESOURCES

CONNECTIONS

Full Speed Ahead

Highly educated university graduates are changing the face of business in the province and Alberta Women Entrepreneurs is helping them succeed



“Wherever a business is in its life cycle, we want to be a connection point to get it the resources it needs at that time.”

Tracey Scarlett, CEO
Alberta Women Entrepreneurs

THERE ARE MAJOR DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AFOOT.

Women are attending university in greater numbers than men. Baby boomers are retiring. Add technology that allows business owners to work remotely into that mix, and highly educated skilled women are becoming entrepreneurs in greater numbers than ever before.

As this shift happens, Tracey Scarlett, CEO of Alberta Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) will be there to lead the organization that is helping to usher in this change. “There is a whole perfect storm of demographics that is happening,” explains Scarlett, from her seat in one of the meeting rooms at AWE’s downtown Edmonton office. “Those educated women are going out into the corporate world and they’re building their foundation. Then they’re taking those skills, after they’ve learned them in the corporations or government or institutions, and they’re deciding that they are going to take control of their future by developing a business.”

As a result, businesses everywhere are already accessing more contract work, more flex work or project-based work, as women begin to work for themselves. It’s a trend that will only continue. “There’s a big shift that is going to be happening over the next decade or two,” says Scarlett. “The way we do business is going to change as a result of these pioneers that are saying ‘I’m going to do my business, my way.’ It’s not that they’re looking to do a lifestyle business just as a hobby. They are looking at a business as a way to continue their professional careers.”

But a major shift in business doesn’t come without some growing pains. Building any business from the ground up is a challenge, and luckily for Alberta entrepreneurs, AWE is there to help. Whether a woman is just beginning her own business, is ready to expand, or is looking to sell and move on, the AWE office is a hub for women at all stages of the entrepreneurial landscape. “We’re a connector,” Scarlett says. “Wherever a business is in its life cycle, we want to be a connection point to get it the resources it needs at that time.”

In the 10 years Scarlett has been involved with AWE, first as a board member and then as CEO since 2007, she has seen a definite shift in the scope of businesses that AWE serves. When the

October 1994: Western Economic Diversification Canada (WD) commits \$38.5 million including a \$20 million loan fund to establish centres across Western Canada. Winnipeg opens the first office.

October 1995: Launch of Alberta Women’s Enterprise Initiative Association (AWEIA).

1996: Angela Santiago co-founds the Little Potato Company in Edmonton, a company that grows and sells small spuds.

November 1994: First Alberta Women’s Enterprise Initiative Advisory Group meeting hosted by WD.

November 16, 1995: AWEIA officially opens its doors with offices in Edmonton and Calgary.

October 1996: Within the first 10 months of AWEIA opening its doors, the organization receives over 10,000 inquiries. At that time, 20 loans have been approved and 100 business plans are in process. Corrine Tessier is executive director for the first five years.

organization began in 1994, it was primarily a centre for Western Economic Diversification Canada to help women access the capital and support they needed to make their entrepreneurial visions a reality.

Fifteen years later, access to capital remains an issue for some female business owners. AWE still provides loans to businesses, but Scarlett says the organization now finds itself focusing on how to help women grow their businesses. “Now we’re moving to the stage of business owner who is in business; they’ve already got their feet wet,” Scarlett says. “They’re a few years in and they’re trying to figure out, ‘OK, now how do I really make money with this?’”

This might mean seeking overseas markets or making connections to new marketing networks, a task which is daunting to any business owner, male or female. AWE recognizes this need by providing networking opportunities, including an annual conference, and through specific programs tailored to help women access new markets. “We now have a program where we connect businesses that are owned by women to supply chains of major corporations and we have a training program to support that,” Scarlett says. Other AWE programs include a two-day “preparing for growth” bootcamp and one-on-one coaching to help women develop and grow their business. AWE offers loans up to \$150,000 and also has a microloan program.

Looking forward, the organization will continue to increase its profile, promoting the immense economic impact that female entrepreneurs have on the Alberta economy. Scarlett says that for every dollar AWE lends out, businesses generate \$30 in revenue. Add it all up and that’s a \$390-million impact on the Alberta economy in the organization’s 15-year history. And with highly educated women entering the workforce, AWE will ensure that its contribution to the economic well-being of the province, and all women and men within it, only continues to grow.

“What we want is to create an expectation of success within the network so that women going into business aren’t just looking at creating a job,” Scarlett says. “They’re looking at building a really strong, economically viable venture that can compete locally, nationally and internationally.” 📌

BACK TO ITS ROOTS

In the 1990s the government identified that there was a growing number of women entrepreneurs in the country. They were starting businesses at a faster rate than men but they were also encountering obstacles in accessing financing and business resources.

In 1994, Western Economic Diversification Canada (WD) announced a \$38.5 million funding commitment to establish the Women’s Enterprise Initiative including a \$20 million loan fund (\$5 million per province) to establish centres across Western Canada. Winnipeg opened the first office in Western Canada.

“The purpose was to try and get to these women entrepreneurs and provide them with valuable added services so that they could grow their businesses and compete on a level playing field,” says Maureen McMurtrie, who was a member of the original advisory committee.

The Edmonton office opened in July 1995 as the Alberta Women’s Enterprise Initiative Association (AWEIA) with the aim of assisting women wanting to start, expand or purchase a business. The name was changed to Alberta Women Entrepreneurs Association (AWE) in 2004.

“My sense was that this was a really important organization, that it would play a vital role in breaking down barriers that women face, barriers that they face in creating and operating small businesses across the country and specifically in Western Canada,” says Oryssia Lennie, who served as the deputy minister of WD from 1997 to her retirement from the Government of Canada in June 2009.

“My thought was at the time that it was a much-needed kind of assistance because women-owned businesses often didn’t have the same access to capital, didn’t have the same access to mentoring opportunities or the same kind of business support services that are often there for other companies.”

An impact assessment conducted by Ference Weicker & Company Ltd. in 2008 showed that business outcomes were improved thanks to the support provided by these Women’s Enterprise Initiative programs. In fact, 41 per cent of loan clients felt they had a zero per cent chance of developing their business to the current extent without WEI assistance. Five years after working with AWE, 75 per cent of clients continue to operate.

January 1998: By this date, AWEIA has responded to over 8,400 inquiries, hosted 2,330 business coaching sessions and provided 48 loans totalling \$1.25 million.

1998: Eveline Charles steps out from behind the hair salon chair to focus entirely on developing her business. She changes the name of her company from Bianco Nero to EvelineCharles Salons, Spas, building it into a multimillion-dollar corporation.

October 2000: Lorraine Moulding joins AWEIA as executive director.

1998: AWEIA hosts its first ever Pan West Conference for Women Entrepreneurs.

September 1999: By this date, AWEIA has responded to over 42,000 inquiries from 13,000 women and 4,000 women had accessed comprehensive services. Loans total over \$3.5 million.

May 2001: Women’s Enterprise Week: AWEIA hosts Sweet Success Gala on May 24 to award Minister’s Award for Excellence.

Evolutionary Road

Alberta Women Entrepreneurs' client success stories highlight the progression of women-owned businesses over the past 15 years

IT'S A "PAPERWORK DAY" FOR EMPLOYEES AT

Edmonton's Keystone Labs, so the test laboratory is unusually quiet as we put on the requisite white coats and safety glasses to begin our tour. Founder and president Jodi McDonald points out some of the equipment – a stability chamber to test the shelf life of drug products; a gas chromatograph used for separating and analyzing compounds – just like the one they use on television crime drama *CSI*, she points out.

It's the type of sophisticated equipment you'd expect to find at a company that provides contract testing services for pharmaceutical and biotech companies across the country. Demand for Keystone's services has been high since opening its doors five years ago. At the time, no contract testing services were available in the West. McDonald identified a need for the service. "We provide a service that every single company that has a drug product idea is going to need... We're kind of there to help them find their way." She continues to grow her business in what she describes as an organic way. "The services that we offer our clients allow us to grow. As they need tests done, we start to develop that expertise," she says.

In many ways, McDonald's story highlights how much female entrepreneurship has evolved over the past 15 years. While it's no secret that the number of self-employed women has been continuing to grow – outpacing male-owned businesses by almost double and now totalling more than 110,000 in Alberta – the nature of those businesses is also shifting.

"Women are moving into what would have been non-traditional sectors – manufacturing, oil and gas, some of the resource-based sectors, and also business services," says Karen Hughes, associate professor at the University of Alberta. The list goes on, says Judy Harcourt, co-founder of Harcourt Recruiting Specialists and a board member with Alberta Women Entrepreneurs, who adds biotech, life sciences, engineering, insurance, even construction. Many of these sectors are producing higher returns than the traditional ones and, in some cases, providing more opportunities for business growth.

"Another trend," says Harcourt, "is that the women that are opening businesses today are very well-educated." As a result, they're recognizing business opportunities when they see them and doing the necessary market research and business planning to improve their chances of being successful.

That's exactly what Phoebe Fung did before opening up an award-winning upscale wine bar called the Vin Room in Calgary only about a



JODI McDONALD

year and a half ago. Fung, who has an MBA from Queen's University, had taken a year off from her job in the oil and gas industry and was visiting a wine bar in Houston with her brother when the idea came to her: "Calgary doesn't have a true wine bar." So, why couldn't she open one? "Once we wrote the business plan, we found it pretty easy to convince ourselves that this was a good concept and had some competitive advantage and we should follow our dreams and do it," says Fung. And so began a multimillion-dollar renovation of a heritage site in Calgary and the opening of a wine bar that boasts 70 wines by the glass, the largest number in Canada. That's made possible by Enomatic wine machines, imported from Italy, that use argon gas to preserve wine between 20 to 60 days.

Unlike women in the past who often started businesses out of necessity, many today, like Fung, are making a concerted decision to start up a business – leaving executive positions or professional careers to do so. They're also combining marketing savvy with innovative thinking to identify

April 2002: AWEIA hosts Pan West Conference for Women Entrepreneurs, under the theme "Impact."

September 2002: AWEIA holds Sweet Success Award Gala presenting the Minister's Award for Excellence.

August 2003: By this date, AWEIA has responded to over 85,000 inquiries, has loaned out over \$5.9 million, has had over 15,000 attendees to events and training, and over 14,200 business advising sessions. 18,600 Alberta women have accessed its services.

September 2002: By this date, AWEIA has loaned over \$5.3 million to 189 businesses.

2002: Jennifer McNeill co-founds software company CipherSoft in Calgary. Seven years later, she sells the company to Unify Corp.

October 2003: Alison Gray takes position of AWEIA executive director.

trends in the marketplace. Fung has managed to tap into the one of the top food trends in restaurants today: tapas, or small plates, to complement the restaurant's extensive selection of wines. She doesn't intend to stop there. "I really see Vin Room as an extension of creating a wine and food culture so I'm looking to see where I can expand. I think it is an untapped market."



PHOEBE FUNG

We were cash positive in our first year. That all stems from having the right staff, the right structure and the right concept in place.

Phoebe Fung
Owner, The Vin Room


Marci Andrews brings some impressive marketing muscle to her company b.l.i.s. (because life is special) inc., including a stint with consumer products giant Procter and Gamble. Out for breakfast with friends, one was discussing the problems she was having managing her infant son's persistent ear infections, and how challenging it was to keep track of antibiotics and doctor's visits. That's when the idea for the HealthPod Baby was born.

Along with co-founders Nancy Scott and Jana Sinclair, Andrews developed the sturdy zip-shut binder that allows parents to keep all of a child's health information organized in an easily portable format. But getting it from an idea to an actual product didn't happen overnight. The co-founders worked with a team of over 20 health-care providers and also interviewed more than 200 parents while designing the product.

Their efforts are paying off. The product was selected as one of the top essential pregnancy products by Disney Family in 2009, and, four years into the business, they've sold more than 6,500 across Canada, the U.S. and six other countries both online and through Canadian retailers. They are continuing their marketing push on the Internet. "We are really diving heavily into social media, Facebook and Twitter," says Andrews, who'd like to see the product expand further into the American market.

The ability to sell and market online is a trend that is breaking down barriers for many women entrepreneurs, says Hughes from the U of A. "With more technology-based types of businesses, it's much easier. You can set up a web-based company ... in capital terms the kind of investment is not as significant as it once was."

So what's next for women entrepreneurs in the province? A conference hosted by Alberta Women Entrepreneurs in April is telling. It was geared to "women who want to take that next step and expand their businesses," says Harcourt. Business heavyweights like W. Brett Wilson from hit CBC show *Dragons' Den* shared their insights on strategies for business growth.

Back at the lab, Jodi McDonald shares her vision. "My dream is to someday have a full-service test facility with my own building and a key to the door," she says. It's a dream that's likely not far off as women across the province like her continue to reach for their business goals and, in so doing, contribute to the diversity of our communities and our economic strength. 

2003: Cold- and flu-fighting product Cold-FX is launched by CV Technologies (now Afexa). Dr. Jacqueline Shan is the president and chief scientific officer.

June 2005: By this date, AWE has loaned over \$8 million to 345 businesses, responded to over 108,000 inquiries, had 18,450 business advising sessions, and AWE clients have created 829 jobs.

2005: Criterion Research Corporation owner Maureen McCaw sells her company to Leger Marketing.

May 19, 2004: AWEIA changes name to Alberta Women Entrepreneurs (AWE).

December 31, 2005: Karen D. Hughes from the University of Alberta publishes the book *Female Enterprise in the New Economy*, which explores the reasons that women are starting businesses in record numbers.

February 2006: By this date, AWE has loaned more than \$8.8 million to about 350 women-owned businesses, resulting in more than 800 jobs in Alberta.

Bridging the Gap

New AWE program helps women-owned businesses connect with major contracts

IN ALBERTA AND ACROSS THE COUNTRY, WOMEN in business are a robust force. At present, nearly one million women entrepreneurs in Canada contribute over \$18 billion to the nation's economy.

There's a disconnect, however, between the number of women entrepreneurs and the number of domestic and international supplier contracts awarded in the country. WEConnect Canada estimates that small- to medium-sized women-owned businesses comprise less than five per cent of all domestic and international suppliers to corporations and governments. It's an interesting trend, given that 97 per cent of Fortune 500 companies have supplier diversity programs which encourage them to use minority- and women-owned businesses as suppliers.

Alberta Women Entrepreneurs is partnering with its counterparts in B.C., Saskatchewan and Manitoba to help close this gap. The initiative is called "Access to Supply Chains" and is designed to help women entrepreneurs connect to new business contracts.

Launched on June 5 by Women's Enterprise Initiative (WEI) partners, which include AWE, Women's Enterprise Centre British Columbia, Women Entrepreneurs of Saskatchewan and Women's Enterprise Centre Manitoba, the program is supported by a \$544,000 federal investment. It will help women grow their businesses by opening doors to corporate contracts, government contracts and access to new markets in Alberta, Canada and around the world.

"The need really stems from the under-representation of women in large contracts," says Marcela Mandeville, AWE's programs and external relations manager. "The access to contracts and networks that are offered by this program will create a lot of exciting opportunities."

Companies like Spirit Staffing & Consulting Inc., with offices in Edmonton and Calgary and annual revenues in excess of five million dollars, stand to benefit from the Access to Supply Chains program.

"We're looking to grow and expand," says Beatrice Floch, owner and operator of the employment agency's Edmonton branch. Within a year, she plans to move to a larger office and add a couple of recruiters to her current team of four. She also hopes to secure more staffing

contracts with international companies, which she has been invited to quote on, thanks to her company's growing recognition in the industry. "I think the word is getting around that we've had some really successful placements," she says. With the new program, that's sure to grow even more.

Floch's business was kick-started seven years ago with a \$28,000 business loan from AWE. It didn't take long to see results – this year her office posted almost \$2 million in revenue, and the Calgary office made in approximately \$3.5 million.

AWE's programs are geared to all

levels of business, from startup to mature. In fact, this fall AWE will host the Building on Success Series, workshops to improve overall performance by helping businesswomen expand their companies, hone marketing skills and manage processes. Presenters will include high-calibre business leaders such as Lina Heath, president of EvelineCharles Salons, Spas, & Beauty MD.

In addition, the organization's NextStep to Success program is expanding from Calgary and Edmonton into northern Alberta. The program, funded by Alberta Employment and Immigration, helps Aboriginal businesswomen start, grow and expand their companies.

The Access to Supply Chain program is the latest addition to AWE's ever-expanding list of offerings. The program is geared primarily at companies operating under business-to-business models, and includes business training, mentorship and coaching.

"It serves as a networking opportunity. We've done a lot of work at AWE to connect women within the province of Alberta," says Mandeville. "But this program in particular offers an opportunity for women business owners who are working on contracts or doing work outside of Alberta. It's not only access to these corporations and government contracts, but it's also access to other business owners who provide complementary services."

Heading into the next 12 months, Mandeville is bullish on the new program's potential. "Women business owners in Alberta will win contracts and increase revenues in their businesses. That's our goal," she says. "In turn they'll be able to increase employment and provide economic leverage as well, to provide benefit to the Alberta economy overall." ❖

The access to contracts and networks that are offered by the Access to Supply Chains program will create a lot of exciting opportunities.

2006: Zahra Al-harazi founds design studio Foundry Creative. In just three years it will boast a list of high-profile clients and garner international awards.

Fall 2007: AWE is rebranded "Realize Success" and launches new website.

April 2008: AWE hosts Women's Business Blaster.

January 2007: Tracey Scarlett takes over role of AWE chief executive officer.

Fiscal 2007-08: AWE loaned nearly \$925,000 to 18 businesses, from which 74 jobs were created/maintained, and supported over 2,500 women entrepreneurs through training, business advising, and information services. Loans now total over \$10 million.

GLOBAL ATTENTION

Maggie O'Carroll arrived from

England to attend the Diana International 2010 Research Conference in Banff to learn from some of the world's leading female entrepreneurship researchers, namely Karen Hughes and Jennifer Jennings from the University of Alberta.

"We've been very familiar with their work over here in Europe and it has been hugely influential in terms of helping us not only influence policy in the U.K. and Europe-wide but also in terms of being able to develop effective services and support mechanisms and frameworks to help women start and grow their own businesses." O'Carroll is a founding member of Train 2000, a women's economic development agency and social enterprise with offices in Liverpool and Manchester.

O'Carroll has also been looking at how this research is being put into practice in Canada, specifically how organizations like Alberta Women Entrepreneurs are supporting female entrepreneurship. "Their program is hugely impressive. It really is quite significant in terms of the return on investment that the Canadian taxpayer is getting against the number of jobs created and the number of businesses sustained," says O'Carroll. A 2008 study found that 75 per cent of companies that accessed its services remained in business over a five-year period.

In the U.K., O'Carroll is spearheading some innovative programming of her own with the establishment of an \$8-million international centre of excellence around female entrepreneurship. It will not only draw in best practices and research on this topic from around the world but will also house up to 80 businesses within the centre, serving as an incubation centre and a microcosm of female entrepreneurship that can be studied.

Future Focus

INCOMING ALBERTA WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS BOARD CHAIR

Jennifer McNeill knows all about accessing supply chains. A serial entrepreneur, she's built four software companies in Calgary and sold them all. In 2002, she co-founded CipherSoft, which topped the list of *Alberta Venture* magazine's annual list of Fastest Growing Companies in 2000. The company turned heads and was bought by Unify Corp. in 2009. Recently she started another new company called Dixie Foster Consulting Ltd.


"We are expanding dynamically what we offer," she says. "The Access to Supply Chains is a really cool program because it allows these businesses to be able to co-ordinate and have access to people who need their products and services," McNeill says.

Looking ahead to AWE's next 15 years, she sees the organization changing dynamically to meet evolving needs and take advantage of new opportunities. Thanks to the Internet,



JENNIFER MCNEILL

women entrepreneurs can more easily grow their businesses in a global marketplace. "I think we have the opportunity to help in a very explosive way," she says. "They might be thinking, 'If I could sell a thousand of these, then I'm going to make \$100,000 this year.' What we want them to think is, 'What if you sell a hundred thousand globally, then your whole life changes.' That also has an impact on our local and provincial economy."

McNeill has a long list of accomplishments to her name. In 1997, the YMCA nominated her for Woman of the Year in Calgary. In 2000 and 2004, Ernst & Young nominated her as Entrepreneur of the Year. And in 2006, she was named as one of Canada's 100 Most Powerful Women. "Alberta is a great place to grow a business," she says. 

January 2009: Launches NextStep to Success Program for Aboriginal women, funded by Alberta Employment and Immigration.

April 2009: AWE hosts Innovative Approaches to Success annual conference.

May 2010: AWE hosts Innovative Approaches to Success 2010.

Fiscal 2008-09: Responded to over 2,700 information requests, over 1,300 business advisory sessions, financed over \$1.03 million in loans to 17 businesses, creating/maintaining 65 full-time jobs. Loans now total \$11.04 million.

Fiscal 2009-10: Financed over \$1.7 million to 27 businesses, creating/maintaining the equivalent of 122 full-time jobs. Also provided 1,150 business advisory sessions and responded to over 3,000 requests for information.

June 2010: AWE launches Access to Supply Chains program to help women entrepreneurs grow their businesses with a federal investment of \$544,000 towards this initiative that will garner access to domestic and international supply chains.

Looking Back Moving Forward

Building on its 15 year history, AWE is opening new doors for today's women entrepreneurs – providing connections and inspiration to help them take their businesses to the next level.

PRIORITIES AND SERVICES

Entrepreneurial Capacity Building

- Training & Workshops
- Business Advising
- Mentorship
- Service Provider Referrals
- Service Provider Partnerships
- Targeted Programs

Access to Capital

- AWE Loan Programs
- Financial Institution Referrals
- Financial Partnerships
- Microloan Programs

Connection to Networks & Markets

- Program Partnerships
- Access to Experts
- Peer to Peer Networks
- International Markets
- Angel & Other Private Investor Networks

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Realize Success

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