

The Sky's the Limit

with Office Depot Supplier Diversity

By Lori Arellano



Robert McCormes-Ballou, Director of Supplier Diversity

As a recipient of numerous awards, Office Depot is no stranger to success. The company practices what it preaches. With a commitment to assisting historically underutilized businesses (HUBs), Office Depot proudly offers the most comprehensive supply chain diversity model of its kind. This creates a win-win scenario in the communities which it serves. "It's tied to the Office Depot vision of work. We're all about delivering winning solutions that inspire work life and supplier diversity," says Director Robert McCormes-Ballou. He continues, "It's delivering winning and diverse solutions for our customers. It's delivering solutions that enable women to be more successful in doing business, and quite frankly it's delivering solutions that will make women and minority companies want to meet our customers' needs here at Office Depot to use supplier diversity to develop winning solutions to our customers, our shareholders and our employees."

Ballou describes the Office Depot supply chain process as "transparent." He states, "There's nothing in the dark you will find about how to do business with Office Depot - even if you look at our corporate report and how we conduct business. Our CEO Steve Orgman is adamant about transparency in business. There's an ethics we hold in supplier diversity so there's nothing secret about how we do business at Office Depot. It's all right there in a nice little chart." He refers to the web site, officedepot.com. Kedar Morarka, president and founder of Image Projection West (IPW), attests

to Office Depot's successful supply chain diversity program, "At IPW, we have been working with Office Depot for many years. I strongly believe that they are one of the very few companies that truly understands the benefits of diversity and they embrace it fully in all aspects of their business."

Founded in 1986, Office Depot, Inc. sells products and services with 1,009 stores operating in the U.S. and Canada. The distribution channels include stores, direct mail, contract delivery, the Internet and business-to-business electronic commerce. The supplier diversity program was officially implemented in 2002 and has achieved much success since then, including identifying HUB-certified prospects and creating a comprehensive janitorial outsourcing program.

With McCormes-Ballou at the helm, Office Depot has consistently earned major corporate, national, and regional awards, including one of "America's Top 50 Corporations for Multicultural Business Opportunities" from 2000-2005 by Div2000.com; Women's Business Enterprise National Council "Top Corporation's List" from 2001-2005; and the Florida Regional Minority Business Council's "President's Award" and "Local Corporation of the Year." Robert himself has also been recognized as "Advocate of the Year" by the Florida Minority Supplier Development Council. What he attributes to the supplier diversity program's success is Office Depot's vision and proactive approach to being the best. "Our whole concept is whatever we're doing this year we try obviously do better each additional year," says Ballou.

An opportunistic approach and a strong initiative also attribute to Office Depot's success as a top diversity supplier. "The best takeaway for Office Depot is really the sky's the limit. We're looking for any and all opportunities to increase business with women and minority owned companies," explains Ballou. He continues, "If a

company has the right product that will satisfy our customer's needs, we're looking to talk to them yesterday."

Robert McCormes-Ballou started his career at Office Depot in 1995 as an assistant buyer 10 years ago and moved up the ranks to become Office Depot's Director of Vendor Development. Responsibilities include managing Office Depot's Strategic Vendor Program, New Business Development and the Vendor Diversity Process. A graduate of the University of Florida, he serves on the Board of Directors in many capacities and is active in professional organizations, including the National Minority Supplier Development Council, Women's Enterprise National Council and Diversity Information Resources. Locally, Robert serves as Board Chair for the Florida Minority Supplier Development Council and Secretary for the Women's Business Development Council – Florida.

Most recently, in terms of supplier diversity, Office Depot is preparing for an upcoming success strategies conference which celebrates women in business and the success that women have been able to gain over the last couple of years. Says Robert Ballou, "As part of that we have a matchmaker conference where we match women business owners with respective buyers at Office Depot as well as the sponsoring companies. Our most recent initiatives have been pulling relations with other companies so that women in business can benefit by getting business with Office Depot and our partners."

Asked if supplier diversity in America would be needed 20 years from now, he replies, "Yes because the historically underutilized businesses and the definition change every 10 years - so with the changing demographics in America, the changing demographics of the workforce, the changing demographics of who is corporate America and the small businesses."