

Different kind of boot camp

Seminar focuses on women running small businesses

By JOHN YANTIS
TRIBUNE

The logo says it all. It's a hot pink, high-heeled stiletto that is morphing into a grungy army boot.

For Susan Ratliff, it's the perfect picture to illustrate a woman ready to take on the challenge of running a small business.

She is organizing what she calls the first boot camp for women entrepreneurs, an all-day seminar in Scottsdale geared to the microbusiness owner with fewer than 10 employees.

Ratliff decided on a war theme after attending too many unhelpful business seminars.

"I have been active in the community and the chamber and have been going to seminars for years, and I never went to any event from any chamber that ever really celebrated the microbusiness," said Ratliff, owner of Exhibit Experts, which offers portable exhibit products for trade shows and other uses.

"The other thing about attending conventions and seminars is I often left with nothing I could tangibly implement in my business to make it better. It was a lot of philosophy and motivation and all that kind of stuff. I was looking for meat and potatoes,

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Boot camp info

- 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday at the Hilton Scottsdale Resort and Villa, 6333 N. Scottsdale Road
- Registration is \$69. Exhibit spaces are available for \$275. For

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something I could go into business and make money with."

Ratliff promises a power-packed day of speakers and workshops that aren't "theory, philosophy or fluff, just an arsenal of ideas and high-caliber ammunition to help battle your most difficult business challenges." The 300-odd attendees that are expected will enjoy catered "rations" and the event will have their entrepreneurial spirit standing at attention, Ratliff promises.

"We're having a ball with it and I'm finding that business owners like myself really have been wanting something that they can sink their teeth into," she said. "Every speaker will be a microbusiness owner that will really give them things so they can walk out of that event and use them the next day in their business.

Ratliff has certainly tapped into an army of people like herself.

There are nearly 137,000 privately held women-owned firms in the Valley, according to the Center for Women's Business Research. That accounts for 54.7 percent of all privately held firms in the metro area.

Among the top 50 metropolitan areas in the country, the Valley ranked 10th this year in the number of women-owned companies, sixth in employment and fifth in sales, according to the center. Women-owned firms in the Valley ranked fourth in the growth in the number of those type of firms between 1997 and 2004, second in employment growth and second in sales growth.

The Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, a partner in the boot camp program, says 93 percent of its membership is made up of

business that employ 100 or fewer, and 62 percent of that total is microbusinesses with fewer than 10 employees.

It's a trend that Mary Lou Besette has helped make.

The director of the Center for the Advancement of Small Business at Arizona State University, Besette was president a decade ago of the Phoenix Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners.

"The challenges for us then was we were still trivialized," Besette said. "They still viewed women in business as some mom making baskets in the spare bedroom while the baby was taking a nap. Home-based businesses were viewed as not serious. I'm very proud in the past 10 years, women business owners have the unique opportunity to run a business and find harmony in their lives. Women have led the way on that."

Virtually all job-creation in Arizona is in companies with fewer than 10 people, Besette said.

"Fewer than 10 people is just the way business is developing in Arizona," she said.

Besette said many women are sole proprietors who choose not to have employees.

"Instead they have a cluster of subcontractors," she said. "Women like that for a lot of reasons. First of all, they don't have a lot of employee problems. They would rather pay bills than have employees problems. Secondly, they like to pick the vendors based on the needs of the client. The sole proprietor used to be trivialized. If you were a sole proprietor, all you did was make a job for yourself and you had no economic impact. That's no longer true."

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