

Published March 30, 2012, 09:11 PM

N.D. sees big gains in number of women-owned businesses

Report: State now has 18,400 firms owned by women with \$2.6 billion in annual sales

When Dona Wambsganss earned her certified public accountant license 12 years ago, she said the industry was dominated by men. But Wambsganss said in recent years, more and more women entrepreneurs are getting her help with developing a business plan and securing financing to join the growing ranks of women business owners across the state. The number of women-owned firms in the state has grown by 48.2 percent since 1997 to an estimated 18,400, according to a new American Express OPEN report that analyzed Census Bureau data.

By: [Ryan Johnson](#), Grand Forks Herald

When Dona Wambsganss earned her certified public accountant license 12 years ago, she said the industry was dominated by men.

The Grand Forks resident also noticed the gender gap in her new role as a business owner as she worked to expand Business Specialties CPAs from an in-home operation to a firm that now employs seven at its office along 32nd Avenue South.

But Wambsganss said in recent years, more and more women entrepreneurs are getting her help with developing a business plan and securing financing to join the growing ranks of women business owners across the state.

"The opportunity is there for businesses in general to start in the area and in North Dakota, and so I believe that it does make it easier for a woman to start," she said.

The number of women-owned firms in the state has grown by 48.2 percent since 1997 to an estimated 18,400, according to a new American Express OPEN report that analyzed Census Bureau data.

These businesses now employ about 19,000 and have annual sales of \$2.6 billion — more than double the \$1.2 billion in annual sales by the state's 12,417 women-owned firms 15 years ago.

Even playing field

The report, which was released March 21, estimates Minnesota now has 141,900 women-owned businesses, a 30.9 percent increase since 1997, that now boast about \$20.4 billion in annual sales.

About 30 percent of American businesses are owned by women, and the number of women-owned firms has grown 1.5 times faster than the national average over the past 15 years.

But Wambsganss said business owners face the same issues, whether it's a man or a woman.

"I really don't see any difference or any real challenges for women in the workplace at this time," she said. "I think there may have been years ago, but you don't see that anymore."

Still, she said the growing popularity of networking groups for women business owners has helped entrepreneurs build up contacts and gain advice as they expand.

Wambsganss is a member of Grand Forks Women Heart Link Network, a group run by Shannon Noack that aims to help women gain referrals and find support in each other.

"We're all just looking to grow our businesses really," Noack said.

Trying to expand

Noack started Snoack Studios, an Internet and graphic design studio, out of her home in Phoenix in October 2009 and moved the business to Grand Forks a year later.

So far, Noack is like many women business owners across the country — she has no other employees to do the work.

According to the American Express report, 82 percent of all American businesses and 90 percent of women-owned firms have no employees other than the owner.

Just 3 percent of all firms and 2 percent of those owned by women have 10 or more employees, but these larger businesses account for 90 percent of all jobs in the non-farm private sector.

In North Dakota, the number of women-owned firms increased 48.2 percent from 1997 to 2012 but their employment grew at a slower rate of 40.9 percent.

The state's average number of workers per women-owned firms is now 1.03, the same average as Minnesota's 141,900 women-owned firms that now employ about 146,100.

The report shows that the number and revenues of women-owned firms in America have steadily grown since 1997, yet their employment has gone up just 8 percent in the past 15 years.

But Noack said she is determined to grow her business, and her goal is to someday hire employees and own office space instead of working out of her home.

Lots of help

Charlotte Wood, president of Networking Business Women in Grand Forks, said she started Reddwood Organizing last year because she wanted to have flexibility to attend her three children's events and set her own hours.

"I do get a sense that there are quite a few parents who are choosing to create their own business so they do have control over their schedules," she said.

Wood said the region's "great" economy, as well as plenty of assistance from state agencies, the U.S. Small Business Administration and networking groups, has made it easier for women in Grand Forks to start their own firm.

"I do believe Grand Forks has a greater sense of opportunity here, and there's also a great deal of help," she said.

Shelly Duchscherer and her husband had long wanted to own their own business, and she said that opportunity came about 14 years ago when they purchased East Grand Floral in East Grand Forks.

Their business was successful, and they bought Hall's Floral in Thief River Falls eight years ago and expanded into North Dakota about three years ago when they purchased Wy's Floral along Columbia Road in Grand Forks. Their staff also has grown over the years, and they now employ 20 workers.

Duchscherer said her role as a business owner was not unique when she bought East Grand Floral; most of the other flower shops in the region also were owned by women.

But she has noticed more and more women venturing into the world of business ownership in recent years, she said.

"There have been some things that have popped up around town with floral shops and boutiques, and they're all women," Duchscherer said. "Women are just trying to get out of the house and trying to become their own people."

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