

# PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES

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## PowerLink connects executives with seasoned professionals

Nonprofit provides advisory panels to women-owned firms

BY TRACY CARBASHO

A local nonprofit organization has been empowering women business owners for more than a decade by giving them access to expert advice from established executives.

Founded in 1991, the Mount Washington-based PowerLink has provided advisory panels to 76 companies that are owned and operated by women. Eligible owners are granted a panel that typically consists of three to seven business professionals who volunteer their time to serve as a sounding board for one year.

Sandra Hunter, president of the Ace Lock Inc. security firm in East Liberty, benefited from the input of PowerLink volunteers in 2001 and is now returning the favor by serving on a panel aimed at helping another company. She co-founded Ace Lock with her ex-husband in 1975, bought his shares to become the sole proprietor in 1986 and quickly expanded the business to include the installation of complex electronic security systems.

"When you're in business for a long time, you have to figure out a lot of things on your own because you don't have a board of directors and it would be too expensive to pay for consultants," said Ms. Hunter. "If you



Photo by D. M. Scott

**LINKING TOOL:** Deborah Moses is executive director of PowerLink, which puts women business owners in touch with executives who serve as advisers for one-year terms.

start a business from scratch, you feel responsible for every aspect of the company and you tend to micromanage. It's easy to get caught in the undertow with the day-to-day operations and to lose sight of the big picture."

Ms. Hunter said company leaders often need a little extra advice that they might not get from their own staff members. She encourages other women business owners to be open to suggestions and to guard against the notion that they "have it all figured out."

Deborah Moses, executive director of PowerLink, said members of Ms. Hunter's panel helped her to refocus on the big picture by delegating more responsibilities to her employees — thereby reducing her own work hours and allowing her more quality time for other activities.

"We've had a lot of success stories, such as helping CEOs free up some of their time, helping women who have built value in their company get to a point where they could sell the business and helping a manu-

facturer develop plans to expand," said Ms. Moses. "Concerns presented by company owners usually pertain to financing, sales and marketing, human resources and strategic planning."

Panels, which meet with the business owner on a quarterly basis, usually include a CEO, certified public accountant, chief operating officer, marketing professional, information technology expert, strategic planner and human resources specialist. PowerLink officials estimate the free services pro-

# POWERLINK: *Advisory teams help executives*

vided by the panel members during the one-year period would cost an average of \$10,500 in consultation fees.

In order to be eligible for the PowerLink program, a company must be at least 51 percent owned and operated by a woman, have at least two full-time employees, be beyond startup and ready for the next stage of growth and have annual revenue of approximately \$200,000. Although, Ms. Moses said there is some flexibility with this number. The company must be viable and the owner must be willing to listen to the advice provided by the business professionals.

Eileen Sieff Stroup, president of Titus Networking Inc. in Butler, said she first learned about PowerLink through one of her customers who had been advised by a panel. Titus, a consulting company that focuses on the design, integration and maintenance of business computer networks, has been working with an advisory team since the fall of 2002.

"I have learned better business skills, more efficient accounting practices, better knowledge of company financials and the art of delegation — one of the most important skills for small business owners," said Ms. Stroup.

"A PowerLink panel helps you identify the strengths and weaknesses of your company and gives you a terrific forum to discuss your issues," she said. "By working with the panel's suggestions, the business owner has an opportunity to try fresh ideas that are suited for her particular company."

Francine Miltenberger, who amassed a broad financial background working at Chemical Bank and Chase Manhattan Bank in New York, enjoys helping companies and is now serving on her third panel. She recently served as executive vice president and CEO of the treasury management services at PNC Bank and is currently working in a consulting capacity to help companies and non-profit organizations advance

their growth agendas.

"In my own experience, I believe the hardest part of running a business is finding a good sounding board for your issues and ideas," said Ms. Miltenberger.

"PowerLink helps entrepreneurs find expert resources to address their specific challenges. Having been a CEO and worn many hats, one thing I definitely bring to the panels is a deep appreciation of how tough it is to juggle all those balls. I frequently focus on the quality of the management information the CEO is working with, both financial and strategic indicators, and help her work through or develop growth strategies."

Ms. Moses said PowerLink is geared toward helping women gain a fresh perspective on strategy, operations, capital, profitability, sales and other issues that are vital to a company's long-term success.

The women are encouraged to form their own board of directors or advisory panel after they complete their Pow-

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## ■ AT A GLANCE

### PowerLink

■ Established: 1991

■ Executive director: Deborah Moses

■ Phone: (412) 431-4110

■ Web site: [www.powerlink.org](http://www.powerlink.org)

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erLink experience.

Interested business owners must pay a \$75 application fee and an administration charge, which ranges from \$250 to \$750 depending on the company's annual revenue. Ms. Moses said most of the companies which have received assistance have been located in Allegheny and Butler counties, but PowerLink also helps women whose businesses are situated in Lawrence, Beaver, Armstrong and Indiana counties.

Participants are usually selected in the spring and fall. Information is available by contacting Ms. Moses at (412) 431-4110 or visiting the Web site at [www.powerlink.org](http://www.powerlink.org).

**MS. CARBASHO** is a freelance writer.

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