

**U.S. Small Business Administration
Interview with Nell Merlino (1-21-10)**

“SBA and Count Me In: Working Together to Help Women Entrepreneurs Start, Grow and Succeed”

Ron Johnson: Small businesses account for more than 12 million jobs. Now, of those small businesses, nearly 10.4 million are majority owned by women and the numbers are growing daily. Last year, these businesses generated over \$1.9 trillion in sales. Hello, I'm Ron Johnson with the U.S. Small Business Administration, Your Small Business Resource. And with me today is Nell Merlino, founder, president, and CEO of Count Me In. Welcome, Nell.

Nell Merlino: Oh, thank you, Ron. It's a pleasure to be part of this program.

Ron Johnson: Nell, women are demonstrating their ability to be successful small business owners. What was your motivation for creating Count Me In?

Nell Merlino: Well, I started Count Me In because I was a small business owner myself and recognized that I had a lot of questions and challenges in my own business and was aware that other women obviously did too. I particularly thought access to capital was an issue. But there were a number of other issues just in terms of figuring out sort of the steps and what you do next that I thought must be a challenge for other women as well. Because I was doing okay but I didn't know how to take it to the next step. So I just started to start an organization that would address all of these issues.

Ron Johnson: I understand, Nell, that the Small Business Administration and Count Me In have become partners in a major initiative for women. Now, how does this partnership work and what are some of the benefits to women entrepreneurs?

Nell Merlino: Well, our partnership, the SBA and Count Me In, it's a wonderful example of public and not-for-profit partnerships and what we can achieve together. Because we offer different things from the SBA and between the two organizations, we have this smorgasbord of these complementary services: financial products, coaching, peer support and business education. And I mean just as an example, like Ana Harvey is coming to a big event we're having in Houston in February to speak to women and I've spoken at the SBA. So this is an opportunity to really cross-pollinate and for the SBA to share their findings and success with us. And our women and us to do the same with the SBA, so it's a wonderful opportunity for us.

Ron Johnson: Now, SBA offers many programs and services to help businesses start, grow, and succeed. So what similar or unique services does Count Me In offer women?

Nell Merlino: I think we offer complementary services to what the SBA offers. I'd say we offer a level of coaching that's pretty intense. I know the SBA works with SCORE, but I think our coaching is a little -- is quite a bit different. And in a way that I think really helps people punch through some of the barriers that women have in their heads as opposed to just figuring out, say, a business problem. It's really figuring out why you may be holding yourself

back or why you're afraid of your financials and things like that. So we have a different twist on our coaching, I would say.

Ron Johnson: Nell, I know you understand that sorting through the financial options for women entrepreneurs might be a little confusing for some. So what is your role in ensuring that women have access to capital?

Nell Merlino: Well, I would say money is one of the most important aspects in growing a business, but it is not THE most important. I think that's a big thing that we emphasize with women. I think many of us go looking for money before we're ready. And before we have a really clear understanding and explanation of what we're going to do with the money and why we need it. So I would say one of the things we do is make sure women are fully prepared to approach whatever situation; whether it's a competition or a presentation in front of angel investors or pitching to your friends and family. If you're first starting out, how you're going to convince them and yourself. Quite frankly, that whatever you have planned, you're going to use the money in a responsible way that's going to be helpful to you in growing your business. And that you're going to be able to pay it back if it's that kind of situation.

So we fully prepare women and also stay abreast of -- I mean in this economy lots of things are changing. How one uses credit cards is changing, how one should utilize a relationship with the bank. And we keep women up to date on how those things are changing and also have women who have just had an experience, say, getting an SBA loan. What did they do, how did it go, what was the process like so that others can learn from those that have been successful at it and also learn from those who haven't been successful at it. So we share an enormous amount of information on our website daily. We have group emails. We do a whole lot of things so that people are really up to date on where the opportunities are and what's the best way to go after them.

Ron Johnson: Now, in closing, I'm sure our audience would love to hear some of the success stories of women entrepreneurs who have accomplished their goals, especially any creative resources or steps they have taken to help them succeed in this tough economy.

Nell Merlino: Well, I always love sharing success stories because I am so inspired by the women in our program. And I'm inspired by women business owners generally. But there is one woman who sticks out in my mind. Her name is Garnett Newcombe and she has been part of the Make Mine a Million \$ Business Program since 2008. And when she came to one of our events, she was at \$300,000 in revenue and she had just taken a loan from her husband, which was the last money he had in his IRA account. So she was really -- he sort of said, "I'm going to give you this last bit of money that I have, but we really got to either make it or break it this time." And she came to rehearse -- we have people rehearse elevator pitches and she almost walked out. She didn't do very well. And her husband dragged her back in and said that she had to compete because she had the last of his money. So on the day of the competition, she really did very well and she won one of our Make Mine a Million \$ Business competitions. And one of the first things you get is a coach. And the coach noticed very early -- and this is something that I think applies to most women business owners at some stage in their business -- the biggest thing that was holding Garnett back was that she was not delegating enough responsibility to other people.

Ron Johnson: Women-owned small businesses are helping improve our country's future by providing jobs and contributing each year to more than a trillion dollars in sales. Our thanks to Nell Merlino, President of Count Me In, for sharing how they support women economic independence.

Now, you can learn more about Count Me In at www.countmein.org. Or for more information on SBA's programs and services for women's small business development, that's at www.sba.gov. Until next time, this is Ron Johnson with SBA, Your Small Business Resource.

[End of transcript]