

Office Depot and KleenSlate

By: Joel Gross

Partners in Vision and Innovation

"If you truly believe in what you are doing, you must develop a strong vision. Although there will be many obstacles and challenges along the way, if you have a vision and are willing to do the work, anything is possible," claims Julia Rhodes, CEO of KleenSlate Concepts. Her company has been very successful since its startup, largely due to Rhodes' vision and leadership.

KleenSlate Concepts has also benefited from its partnership with the office supply chain, Office Depot. Office Depot has been successful in developing diverse vendors and suppliers through its Supply Chain Diversity Program, which began with its Vendor Diversity program in 1995 in California and expanded nationally in 1999. When Robert McCormes-Ballou, Director of Merchandising for Office Depot, first met Rhodes in 2003, he had an idea that her company might be a good fit for the program. Although Rhodes was still early in developing KleenSlate at the time, McCormes-Ballou saw the potential for future success.

"We first met KleenSlate at a matchmaker meeting at our Success Strategies conference for business women. Upon meeting, we identified that KleenSlate might be a fit," says McCormes-Ballou. "At the time, [Rhodes] had an idea and a patent but not a manufacturing base behind her. We have been working with her behind the scenes for three years."

Rhodes, a former teacher of 14 years, started KleenSlate after she saw the need for a solution to communications problems in the world of education. "My background was in education and I used what I knew and applied that to what I was learning and the products came out of that," says Rhodes. Her first product invention was the dry eraser for the dry erase market. After that initial invention, Rhodes expanded into an award-winning product development company.

Rhodes discussed her product with McCormes-Ballou, who was intrigued by the fact that Rhodes had a patent for her merchandise. Rhodes and Office Depot worked towards making her a vendor and thereby making some of her KleenSlate products available in Office Depot stores. Office Depot does a tremendous job of not only identifying potential diverse vendors, but also in guiding these companies through the process of becoming a vendor, even if they, like KleenSlate, do not have the necessary manufacturing base. "[Office Depot] led me through a step by step process of becoming a vendor," says Rhodes. "This has not only helped me to do business with Office Depot, but also in my efforts to do business with other corporate retail outlets."

Office Depot's Vendor Diversity Program is focused on understanding the potential vendor's vision and giving them an opportunity to sell an innovative product. "We have put forth an industry standard program that gives small businesses a way to engage Office Depot that is more profitable, more flexible, and allows them to do what they want to do instead of what we ask them to do," says McCormes-Ballou.

McCormes-Ballou stresses that it was Rhodes' vision for her product that sold Office Depot on the idea of making KleenSlate a vendor. "Julia



Robert McCormes-Ballou, Director of Merchandising, Office Depot

knows the [customers'] mindset because she was one. She was a teacher, and developed a product that filled a void that she knew existed. Many innovative products and companies have a unique way of seeing the void that everyone knows exists, but no one has figured out how to address." In late 2003, KleenSlate products were unveiled in Office Depot stores and have been very successful.

Through its interactions with KleenSlate and other vendors, Office Depot has shown that it is one of the marquee corporations in dealing with diverse vendors. "Office Depot is committed to the economic development of the communities in which we work and live," says McCormes-

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Julia Rhodes, CEO of KleenSlate Concepts

Ballou. "This commitment is evident in our industry-leading multi-dimensional approach to small business development."

Office Depot ensures that small and diverse businesses are represented through its Supply Chain Diversity Program. The program helps to create a bridge to assist Historically Underutilized Businesses (HUBs). "We are building community, business and customer relationships that inspire organizational growth and empowerment," explains McCormes-Ballou.

HUBs include certified, minority, women, disabled veteran, and small enterprises. Office Depot ensures that a portion of these businesses are selected as suppliers and vendors through its Supply Chain Diversity Program. "Office Depot is proud to offer the most comprehensive Supply Chain Diversity model of its kind, in order to give HUBs the best opportunities to grow and prosper," states McCormes-Ballou.

Office Depot's Supply Chain Diversity program is comprised of three dimensions: vendor diversity, supplier diversity and Tier One. The Vendor Diversity Program focuses on buying products and services from

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HUBs that are sold directly in Office Depot stores. In 2007, Office Depot has a goal of doing over \$1 billion in sales through products supplied by HUB vendors. The Supplier Diversity Program focuses on buying products and services from HUBs that are used internally by Office Depot. Finally, Tier One is geared towards buying products and services from diverse vendors that are resold through a reseller.

Diverse vendors such as Rhodes have benefited greatly from Office Depot's Supply Chain Diversity Program. Rhodes attributes her success with Office Depot to the relationships that she was able to form throughout the organization.

"THE RELATIONSHIP THAT WAS FORMED AT THE BEGINNING AND THROUGHOUT HAS REALLY BEEN THE MAIN KEY TO SUCCESS.

The relationship is not just with the supplier diversity folks, but with others at Office Depot who work in different fields," shares Rhodes.

As far as her advice for HUBs who have the dream of becoming

a vendor for Office Depot, Rhodes says that preparation is the biggest key.

"Do your homework and understand the company's needs. You have to show up and say, 'this is what I have' and convince them that you can add value to their products and services line."

McCormes-Ballou urges up-and-coming vendors to follow the path of Rhodes when attempting to partner with Office Depot and other corporations. "Julia had done research ahead of time. She did all of her homework before her first presentation. This is a common attribute of other successful partners. They presented not only a solution, but a successful mechanism for delivering that solution."

Diverse businesses wishing to partner with Office Depot can get started by going to the company's website at www.officedepot.com and following the link for diversity. There, the potential supplier or vendor can learn about the three different areas of Office Depot's Supply Chain Diversity Program and secure contacts for each of the three groups.