

This newspaper article was written in February 2006 to profile a Stop & Shop executive.

Director of Supplier Diversity Is Matchmaker for Businesses

If you picture yourself in charge of a company's supplier diversity program, you'd better arm yourself with motivation, education, and determination. The Director of Supplier Diversity for Stop & Shop's parent company, Ahold USA, is James Sturgis, Jr., and he had a healthy dose of all three when the company tapped him for this position 16 months ago.

Surely you're familiar with Stop & Shop, but chances are you've not heard of Ahold, one of the world's largest purchasers of retail and wholesale goods and services. In addition to Stop & Shop, the company operates three US retail firms: Giant-Landover, Giant-Carlisle, and Tops.

Sturgis is responsible for identifying capable and certified minority- and women-owned businesses that have the capacity to service his organization. Right away you sense that this is not your everyday desk job. Finding and identifying the best businesses to service his firm means that Sturgis is out of the office a lot.

First, he has to establish that a firm is certified. Usually this means certification by specific national councils, such as the National Minority Supplier Development Council and the Women's Business Enterprise National Council. Companies who are members of these councils are the firms that he targets.

His position means he is often at conferences and trade fairs, either meeting folks who represent minority- or women-owned businesses, to see if they'd be a good fit for Ahold, or delivering presentations.

Identifying certified firms who are in a good position to service Ahold is just one of his duties. He doesn't make any of the company's buying decisions (which might surprise a lot of people); rather, he is an advocate for these firms. As such, he facilitates their introduction to those who have the buying power. This presents some real challenges.

One common challenge is that small businesses don't typically have the bandwidth to supply all of Ahold's companies. Ahold, like most large firms, looks for vendors that can supply mass quantities.

There's another challenge: making sure that the vendors are prepared when they face the buyers. "I coach, I mentor, I do whatever it takes to get the vendors ready for these meetings," he noted.

Supplier diversity programs had their roots back in the '60s, when the government established the Small Business Administration Program to enhance federal purchases from socially or economically disadvantaged owners of small businesses. And although such programs are common in Fortune 500 companies, they're not generally known.

They aren't teaching supplier diversity in business schools yet, said Sturgis, although the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College does offer a week-long Minority Business Executive Program. Sturgis attended this program, and last year he lectured there.

His professional background makes him ideally suited for his position. He earned his bachelor's degree in industrial and systems engineering from Georgia Institute of Technology, and his MBA from the University of Miami. Before he came to Ahold, he was Manager of Supplier Diversity for four years for Tropicana Products in Bradenton, FL. He started out in HR at Tropicana, and when they created a position as supplier diversity manager, he was the perfect candidate. Sturgis has the career experience, plus he'd just earned his MBA.

Looking back on his first year with Ahold, Sturgis notes that he has been focused on getting to know the industry and the company. Now he's armed to pull together a strategic plan for supplier diversity at Ahold in 2006.

Sturgis has some clear goals in mind. One is to be part of an overall effort to bring customers into his stores and create brand loyalty. Another is to be known for having the premiere supplier diversity program in the grocery industry. And a third goal is to grow his program so that it is global in scope.

As he ramps up for 2006, Sturgis mentions what motivates him as a businessman. "I think it's making a difference - knowing that I may be impacting lives. What I think is so cool, and what kind of drives my love for the industry, is knowing that sometimes I'm responsible for getting someone their first big contract."

Outside of work, Sturgis is involved in a couple of professional organizations. He is vice chairman of the board of the New England Minority Supplier Development Council (NEMSDC) and is on the advisory board of the Center for Women & Enterprise (CWE).

This "matchmaker" of a businessman is in a position to affect the lives of not only minority business owners, but also their families and their communities. What's not to be proud of?