

Black business consortium grows

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Special Writer

Formerly a loose confederation of African-American-owned businesses based in Southfield, the Oakland County Business Consortium (OCBC) has grown to become an important marketing and networking tool for members since its founding nine years ago.

"When the economy goes kaput across the nation, Michigan usually feels it worse, and while that means recession for most companies, it means depression for African-American-owned companies," said Karl Gregory, a founding member of the OCBC and a professor of the school of business at Oakland University in Rochester.

"Most, but not all, African-American-owned business are small- to medium-sized firms and groups like the OCBC really help them to compete. Members can make use of networking opportunities to open up new business prospects, hone their business management skills and attend a host of seminars."

To be sure, after attending a recent OCBC business card exchange, Johnny Brown, president of Independent Copier Service, Inc. in Southfield, said he sold two large copying machines and three service contracts. Other purchase orders may soon follow.

"That was the most fruitful meeting I've ever attended," said Brown, who started his firm in 1987 and presently has four employees. "Right now we're looking to expand, and those type of contacts really help, especially given the state of the economy."

With 125 members, the consortium's mission is to attract and strengthen African-American owned businesses in Oakland County, many of which, though not lacking in entrepreneurial spirit, need help in securing financing or taking the next step to contend with larger competitors.

Strength in numbers

"In the beginning, I never knew if there would be a tomorrow, but you take things day to day and pretty soon you find you've established yourself," said Brown. "But that doesn't mean you can get complacent because your competitors surely won't be. We're a very good, small company, but I want to take it to the next level. To do that, though, the area I need help in is marketing."

The consortium put us in contact with the (Business Enterprise Development Center), and we're learning how to proceed."

The center, located in Troy, assists small area companies and entrepreneurs in such areas as

business counseling, information resources, employee hiring and computer application skills, at little or no charge.

Created as a partnership between Walsh College in Troy, Oakland Community College in Bloomfield Hills, and the Michigan Small Business Development Center in Lansing, the Troy Center helps existing companies experiencing growth, organizational or planning problems, and entrepreneurs just starting out.

"Business-to-organization contacts are one of our main goals," said James K. Ralph Jr., OCBC president and immediate past chairman of the Southfield Chamber of Commerce.

"Whether it's networking, seminars, referrals or education, we

want to strengthen African-American owned businesses anyway we can."

"We usually meet as a group the second Saturday of each month. We put on workshops in accounting, business plans, loan packaging. We also have keynote speakers to address the banking industry or the Americans with Disabilities Act."

Ralph is president of James Ralph Associates, an insurance agency in Southfield that specializes in employee benefits and group health insurance. The firm, which employs two people, was founded in 1983.

Black Business Month

This month, which is Black Business Month, the OCBC will

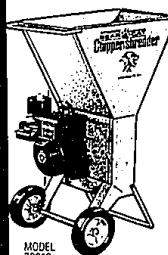
hold its first annual awards banquet, a fund-raising event which will honor Mel Farr as the most successful businessperson in Oakland County. Farr owns several auto dealerships in the metropolitan area and was a former running back for the Detroit Lions.

Terri Lee, a marketing consultant for RBS Communications, an advertising and public relations firm which was started six years ago in Southfield, said she also has benefited from OCBC-sponsored events.

"Our firm as been a member for three years now, and we've come away with new business contacts, attended seminars on business loans and marketing skills, and learned of other companies which face the same challenges as us."

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