

Name: THERESA ALFARO DAYTNER
Company: DAYTNER CONSTRUCTION GROUP
Founded: 2003
Location: MT AIRY, MD

DAYTNER CONSTRUCTION GROUP

TWO VITAL KEYWORDS FOR GOVERNMENT CONTRACTORS ARE “TENACITY” AND “NETWORKING.” BUT FOR THERESA ALFARO DAYTNER, THEY ARE ALSO PARTS OF HER CULTURE

Five years ago, Theresa Alfaro Daytner attended the U.S. Small Business Administration’s annual conference in Washington, DC. Her company, Daytner Construction Group – a construction management and consulting company which represents building owners in overseeing aspects of building assembly from budgeting through construction and move-in – was looking to break into government contracting. Over drinks and canapés, she met a woman named Olga Martinez, who also ran a construction company. “She really took me under her wing,” says Daytner. “The day after I met her, she was due at Capitol Hill to testify before the Small Business Committee, and she took me with her and introduced me to all the top players in government contracting. It made all the difference.”

Today, Daytner Construction is working on its largest federal contract – a two-year, \$52 million construction project in DC for the General Services Administration. This job has bumped up her company’s percentage of federally contracted work to almost 50 percent up from just 5 percent a year ago,

and is forecast to push the company’s annual revenue into seven figures. It’s a triumphant vindication not only of Daytner’s decision to focus on the lucrative government contracting sector but also of the strategy she used to court federal procurement officials, which can be summed up in one word: tenacity.

“Getting that initial foot in the door when it comes to government contracting costs more and takes longer than you’d ever imagine,” says Daytner with a laugh. “There’s a huge learning curve to figuring out the system. Given that, it makes sense to have already been in business for two or three years. Very few companies start by selling to the government, unless they happen to be retired government employees themselves, and already know the procedures. Other than that, be persistent,” Daytner advises. “Put in the face-time, meet the right people at expos and trade fairs, show up and cultivate relationships so that they recognize you and know you’re a serious player who’s here to stay. Get involved in business organizations” (Daytner is currently vice-president of the Maryland Hispanic Chamber of Commerce). “You don’t need to know 500



people, you probably only need five really strong contacts, so focus on those. Mentoring, in the way Olga helped me, can be a huge bonus, but luck, in this context, is a matter of being prepared and making sure you’re in the right place at the right time.”

Daytner also credits her ethnicity and gender as significant factors in her success. “Hispanic culture is very supporting,” she says. “I’ve met a few Hispanic high rollers, who think nothing of giving you access to their own networks of contacts. That’s been hugely helpful. Plus I love letting my hair down with my people.” But from talking to the effervescent Daytner, one feels she would have made it regardless of her background. “I always wanted to be a financially independent woman,” she says emphatically. “I would say I’m pretty competitive. I wasn’t about to be mediocre or average.”

Daytner’s clear-sighted confidence and ferocious work ethic were instilled in her by her parents. She was born and raised in Maryland; her father, a Chilean/Venezuelan immigrant, worked in many different fields, including publishing and hairdressing, while

her mother studied geology at college and would take Daytner and her siblings off to look for fossils. “Most adults aren’t innovative in their thinking; caution tends to kick in as you get older,” she says. “My parents were the opposite, and I’ve inherited that single-minded streak.” For a start, Daytner realized that it wasn’t her destiny to be an employee in a large company. “I’ve found it impossible to work for anyone but myself,” she says, laughing. “The number of times I’ve heard, ‘If you could just learn to focus, you’d be alright...’ She trails off, exasperated. “I saw my lack of focus as a gift. I’m a creative, innovative thinker, and I have a lot of energy.”

Daytner plowed that energy into her own enterprises. She started a roofing company as a young mother in her early twenties: “My then-husband was a roofer and I saw that most of his contractors were quite unprofessional,” she says matter-of-factly. “So I thought, well, it can’t be hard to improve on that. I just have to advertise, get the licenses and insurance, set up a commercial number, get reliable laborers, and go through the home-builder phone-book. By the time I got

to B we had more work than we could handle. That experience formed my business mantra: Use your initiative.”

A couple of years later Daytner left her husband and nascent roofing company and became a CPA. “I never saw accounting as a be-all and end-all,” she says, “but it helped broaden my experience, and also gave me more respect and credibility as a businesswoman.” In 1990, she was working as a project accountant for a general contractor in DC when she met her second husband Allen, who was the project manager. She continued to work as a CPA operating her own practice until 2001, but in 2003 she decided to set up her own company with her husband. “I convinced him that he should combine his technical skills with my entrepreneurial experience,” she says with a laugh, and Daytner Construction Group was born. The early years of the company were exhausting – at one point, Daytner had four children under 10 (including 18-month-old twins) plus two teenage daughters to deal with – but, she says, she and Allen became champion jugglers of their family and business lives. “We simply made it work,” she shrugs.

“I’m pretty good at not carrying baggage, and I’m not a control freak. Just because something has traditionally been done in a certain way, it doesn’t mean it’s set in stone. We’ve got around 15 employees at a 50-50 male-female split, and we make a lot of our policy on the hoof. For instance, we cover 100 percent of our employees’ and their families’ health insurance. That’s unusual, but extremely important to us. That’s where a family-friendly culture starts.”

Daytner set up the construction company with a view to getting government contracts. However, in their first four years of business, their revenues were in the private sector. “The federal government is extremely focused on past performance,” says Daytner. “They can’t afford to take too many risks on untried companies. It can be a bit of a catch-22; that’s where you have to put the legwork in and God knows I did.” Last year, Daytner Construction won a couple of small contracts for the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, which, along with the advocacy of Olga Martinez, set them up nicely for their current contract. The company is now operating at the 50-50 government/

private-commercial sector split that Daytner originally envisaged. “The mix is good, because one sector can help prop up the other,” she says. “But for us to have this large, high-profile government project is huge; it’s great for our business development.”

In 2006 Daytner won the Make Mine A Million \$ Business program – designed to help female entrepreneurs grow their businesses with a combination of money, mentoring and marketing – but now she has her eyes on a different kind of prize.

Daytner is in talks to set up a strategic alliance with a much larger international construction firm. “They’re much further along their life-cycle than we are,” she says, “and we can get each other into mutually beneficial territories. It would be like a great marriage. And our cultures are aligned.” The latter is surely an allusion to the fact that the company she’s teamed up with is owned and run by another Hispanic woman. Given what Daytner has accomplished to date, both in government contracting and in her personal life, this formidable coalition will certainly be unstoppable.



FOR MORE INFO ON DAYTNER CONSTRUCTION GROUP SEE:
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OPPOSITE PAGE
Theresa and Allen's blueprint for success

ABOVE LEFT
A new angle on the daily grind

TOP
Theresa confers with colleague Kim Seal

ABOVE
Keeping the plans on the level