

BLACK ENTERPRISE

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[**MAKING IT**]

WORKING ON THE HIGHWAY

This entrepreneur minds her cash flow and the traffic flow

After the birth of her first child, Bellandra B. Foster decided to take on another challenge: becoming an entrepreneur. And with advanced degrees in engineering, it made sense for her to open a business in the male-dominated industry.

Based in Southfield, Michigan, BBF Engineering Services is a civil and transportation engineering firm. Employing a staff of 12, the firm offers a host of consultation services including construction inspection and testing, construction permit review, traffic and transportation engineering studies, construction engineering, and traffic crash analysis. Launched in 1997, the firm has established a niche specifically for road and bridge projects.

BBF Engineering Services has a roster of clients including the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and the Detroit Department of Public Works. In the first year of operation, the firm's revenue reached \$52,000. Revenue climbed to \$1.2 million in 2002, an increase of \$200,000 from the company's previous year. Projects in the pipeline have enabled Foster to anticipate revenue for this year will exceed \$1.5 million.

Starting out as a home-based business allowed the now mother of two to spend more time with her family. She accumulated more than \$13,000 of personal savings to purchase materials such as computers, specifications and manuals, safety equipment, and computer software. Nearly half of the startup costs (\$6,500) went directly to cover the firm's insurance premiums.

The 42-year-old's interest in math and science started as a youth and led her to earn her master's and doctorate degrees at Wayne State University and Michigan State University, respectively.

Foster felt that tapping into an industry dominated by white males was a challenge. She says, "In the beginning, it was difficult trying to get projects." Since funds were limited, Foster closely monitored the company's cash flow: "I kept most of the business' cash liquid in order to make payroll and cover monthly expenses." Untimely payments from clients also added to problems with cash.

To combat sporadic cash flow, Foster hired staff based on her ability to pay them and the amount of work forecasted. She also became mindful of the type of projects she accepted based upon payout by choosing prime contracts over sub-contracts. In addition, she would not dedicate more than three employees to subcontract projects due to their slower payout.

The turning point for BBF Engineering Services came when the firm was selected as a consultant for the MDOT to perform construction inspection and testing services and a construction permit review. Then, within one month of being awarded the assignment with the MDOT, the firm was offered a project with the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation. The company advised the city on traffic and transportation issues for a proposed casino, and office, recreational, and retail development sites in Detroit.

Further growth is anticipated for the firm. However, family remains Foster's first priority. Her plans include collaborating with another engineering firm to enable the company to compete for



FOSTER IS LOOKING TO COMPETE FOR LARGER CONTRACTS.

larger bids. Foster concludes, "God has been faithful in showing me that if I take care of His business, He will take care of mine."

-Zakiyyah El-Amin

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