

## Melody Warren Breaks Through

BY DAVID BIEDERMAN

**T**he transportation and logistics fields have become more hospitable to women over the years, especially women as resourceful as Melody Warren. As the founder and president of Transportation Logistics, a brokerage, freight forwarding and third-party logistics business based in Kansas City, Mo., Warren has a stable of clients that includes General Mills, Quaker Oats and Emerson Electric. For the latter, she handles inbound shipments of raw goods for a division that manufactures heating and cooling equipment for W.W. Grainger.

About three years ago Warren decided to go after the out-bound side of the Grainger shipments. She knew that, as a small, nonasset-based firm, just getting an audience with that kind of company would be a challenge, so Warren applied for and received a Woman Business Enterprise certificate from the state of Missouri. "Those types of companies aren't going to give me an audience without some type of calling card," she said. "Getting the certification gave me the ability to at least get in front of them."

Becoming certified was a labor-intensive process that included providing the state the serial numbers of every single piece of equipment in the company, including computers. The reason for that, she said, is to show that there are no male silent partners. But the WBE certificate has proved to be a major asset in soliciting the Fortune 500-type clients that Warren prefers and in getting over the insecurity of being nonasset-based. "Not being asset based, if a customer pays me \$100,000, in reality \$90,000 goes to the carriers," she said. "If you are asset based you have much more reason to stay in business. It would be easy for me to just pull the phones and go to the beach. That's why I got the WBE, to say to my customers just give me a chance."

Being certified as a woman or minority-owned business is just a first step, she said. "My best advice is not to feel that anyone owes you anything because of the certification," said Warren. "You still have to perform and you still have to be equal in service and pricing, but getting your foot in the door is a big part of making a sale."

Warren got into the transportation business in 1978 when, fresh out of high school, she worked as a dispatcher for a local trucking firm. There were no women in management positions in what she remembers as the bad old days. "I was dealing with old-school traffic managers who had never dealt with women,"

she said. "We just weren't well received. People would assume we didn't know what we were talking about and we were never allowed to make decisions."

It wasn't just the primitive attitudes toward women that disgusted Warren; it was the lack of ethics in the prederegulation days of trucking. "We were constantly asked to be dishonest with customers," she said. "My boss was always asking me to say we could do things for customers that I knew we couldn't, then I would be asked to call back and lie to them. What he taught me was how not to do business."

Warren had a series of similar job experiences. "Some were crooks," she said. "At one place they took all of the money out of the company. I was there until the last day. It was awful." That's when Warren decided to strike out on her own. "I started feeling that I was never going to get the respect I deserved or be able to use the integrity I knew I had until I was on my own," she said.

Warren believes things have changed a great deal and that most companies are aware that women bring integrity, energy and a powerful work ethic to the transportation and logistics fields. "I don't know if it is me or because I am female but when I tell them something will happen, they know it will happen," she said. "Once I get my foot in the door a sale is easier because I am a woman."

Warren also has helped herself by excelling at golf, an old-boy sport that is as much about networking and business as cracking a sweat. Kansas City is big in both transportation and golf, she said, and as one of only three women that typically play in local tournaments — Warren has a 21 handicap — she gets some golden networking opportunities. "The thing about golf is you have a captive audience for about four or five hours," she said. "I just completed a \$2.5 million deal that began a few years ago on the golf course. I walked up to the tee and was paired with a plant manager from one of the big automakers. It paid for my club membership."

Warren advises women who are entering the field to create a series of small goals. "You have to have levels that you can attain in order to keep marching forward," she said. "When I started out almost 10 years ago it was still very rare for a woman to be an owner in this industry, but now the time is ripe for women."



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*Career Advancement covers education, training, recruitment and career development in the fields of logistics and supply-chain management. Please forward questions, suggestions and concerns to the author at [inexdb@crocker.com](mailto:inexdb@crocker.com).*