

Aide to Women

Assisting women managers in Muslim countries.

STORY BY CIARA REID | PHOTO BY DON IPOCK

Women in male-dominated Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa are learning to lead successful businesses, thanks to a women-owned consultant firm in Lee's Summit, Missouri.

Bellewether Ltd. creates custom-made curriculums for sales, customer service and other business industries. But it expanded internationally after being contacted by Trish Tierney, program director for the Women in Technology Program (WIT) of the **Institute of International Education**. Tierney was looking for a small company to create a curriculum to train women business managers in Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Through a friend, she was guided to the **Kauffman Foundation**, which recommended Bellewether.

"They said they don't usually make referrals, but they had great things to say about Bellewether," says Tierney. And once she discovered that Bellewether was a company run by women, Tierney was convinced that it was the firm for the job. She contacted Kay Saunders, a principal at the company, and went from there.

Within three months, Bellewether had created a curriculum called Business Planning for Sustainability for WIT's program managers to use at their centers. These centers teach women various computer and workplace skills. "At least 2,000 women a year come to those centers," says Jami Henry, vice president and COO of Bellewether. The curriculum is essentially a business plan that teaches managers how to make the centers profitable and sustainable, so they can continue being a resource for women in those targeted Middle East and North African countries.



The finished product was translated into Arabic, which presented some challenges for Bellewether during the creation the business plan. "The six countries we were writing this plan for read from right to left," says Henry. "We had to really look at the formatting, design so that when we did it from left to right, it would be a mirror image. It had to be easily flipped. But it was a fun challenge."

Henry says that the end result was very successful. The curriculum, finished last November, was launched a week after completion. "Many of the managers are educated, some even educated in the

U.S.," says Henry, "and they were committed to returning to their home countries." The response to the training has been positive, Tierney says. "This is one of Bellewether's first international efforts. They were really enthusiastic about working on this project," she says.

The WIT program and Bellewether's curriculum has even been making a difference in war-torn Iraq.

"In Iraq, the men cannot go out because they will be killed or kidnapped. So, it is the women who often must provide for the family," says a program manager in Kuwait. "Because of this circumstance, learning to build Web sites becomes a far more life-sustaining tool than in other places. One night I was away from my three daughters and a bomb exploded. I couldn't contact them by phone, but I knew one daughter had an online journal she used to communicate. I used the Internet to see the entries in her journal. By reading it, I was able to tell that she and the others were alright."

Henry says she feels proud of the curriculum and its purpose. "I feel like this is such a positive thing about how women are helping other women become empowered in the world," she says. **KCB**

JAMI HENRY (ABOVE), COO OF BELLEWETHER, SAYS THOUSANDS OF WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST WILL USE BELLEWETHER'S BUSINESS TRAINING MATERIALS.