

Paving the Way: Toyota's First Hispanic Woman Direct Tier I Supplier Calls Opportunity Exchange 'Key to Growth'

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This story is about the road *taken*. Rosa Santana is the first Hispanic woman to own a business serving as a direct Tier I supplier to Toyota. And her path was paved by the automaker's Opportunity Exchange – an annual two-day event that provides minority-owned businesses the chance to network with direct suppliers.

On Sept. 12, Toyota announced Santana's Forma Automotive LLC will join Toyota Motor Manufacturing, TX (TMMTX) as an on-site supplier beginning in 2015. Forma Automotive will assemble Tacoma truck beds at the plant.

"Had I not participated in OE, my company would not have been known the way we're known by Toyota and we would not have been offered this great opportunity," Santana said.

It's a milestone made possible by 10 years of hard work, dating back to when Toyota first announced it would build a manufacturing facility in San Antonio. At the time, Santana's recently launched Integrated Human Capital (IHC) staffing company was based in El Paso, 550 miles away.

"We opened a tiny office in downtown (San Antonio), because I knew having a presence there was important to anyone who was going to do business with Toyota," Santana said.

Her short-term goal was to work with Toyota's Tier I and Tier II suppliers and begin forming strong relationships for future growth. "I have focused all my time on doing business with their suppliers, and while the end goal was to work directly with Toyota, I knew working with those direct suppliers was an important step in the process."

"Rosa showed initiative and business acumen in cultivating and developing her relationship with Toyota through the years," said Jim Holloway, general manager of supplier relations for Toyota Motor Engineering Manufacturing North America (TEMA). "IHC's experience gives her a good understanding of the automotive business, and now she's shown she's willing and capable of expanding into a new space with Forma Automotive."

A big part of Santana's strategy has been attending the Toyota Opportunity Exchange (OE) the past 10 years. By doing so, she has landed at least one new account each year; in fact, her first San Antonio customer came out of her initial visit to OE in 2005. That's when she met Kevin Shurn, president of Superior Maintenance Co., who later won a bid to provide maintenance and janitorial services for the new Toyota truck assembly plant in San Antonio. Superior Maintenance then contracted with IHC to staff that operation. Since then, IHC has been contracting with and providing staffing, recruitment and direct-placement services to an additional 17 suppliers at that site.

"Our business really has grown with those accounts. A lot of it has to do with our continued participation in OE and our continued success in talking with the right people representing those companies at OE," Santana said. "It's like being a kid in a candy store; you've got everybody's attention right there in one place."

Santana added, “It’s not just about earning a contract, but in growing those contracts each year.”

Now, Santana is sharing in her success, helping other M/WBEs navigate OE and spreading the word. One year, she brought seven new companies to the event. Santana says participating in OE drives more return on investment than any other conference or trade show she’s attended, and the fact that it’s free to participate is no small deed.

“To me, actions speak louder than words. Toyota doesn’t just talk about supplier diversity, they really do what they say they are going to do, and are committed to increasing the opportunities of minority and women owned businesses. What they’re offering is an incredible opportunity.”

“The fact that Toyota has put me in front of all of these suppliers who could become my customers, even if they were Tier II and Tier III suppliers to them, that is the tremendous amount of value of Toyota OE. Now on the other end, as a direct Tier I supplier, I am amazed at the level of commitment and respect for their suppliers.”

Now in its 25th year, the Toyota Opportunity Exchange will be held October 27-28 at the Duke Energy Convention Center in downtown Cincinnati. The event includes seminars, panel discussions and sharing of success stories by Toyota M/WBE suppliers, both direct and indirect.

For more information about Toyota’s supplier diversity program, please visit www.toyotasupplier.com.