

Sustainability of Your Business: Keys to Success Corporate Ambassadors Program Successfully Launched in Morocco



(Casablanca, Morocco) On June 9 and 10, 2008, the Association des Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises du Maroc (AFEM) kicked off the U.S. Corporate Ambassadors program with: *Sustainability of Your Business: Keys to Success*, a two-day conference featuring prominent U.S. and Moroccan speakers from the business community at the Sheraton Hotel in Casablanca, Morocco.

The Corporate Ambassadors program, held in partnership the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) Businesswomen's Network, an ongoing program supported by the U.S. Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and Vital Voices Global Partnership, attracted over 125 participants from all throughout Morocco to share knowledge, insights and skills on general business issues, as well as those specific to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Three U.S. Corporate Ambassadors, Judith Willson (Vice President, Bernstein Global Wealth Management), Kathleen Diamond (Founder & CEO, Language Learning Enterprises, Inc.), and Sandra Taylor (President & CEO, Sustainable Business International, LLC) joined Moroccan business men and women to participate in panel discussions and lead workshops on sustainable corporate growth, knowledge in strategic planning, corporate social responsibility and advocacy topics of interest to businesswomen in the region.

The Corporate Ambassador event got off to a great start. Over 125 people turned out for the opening remarks and the panel session on entrepreneurship and sustainable growth. Bouthayna Iraqui-Houssaini (AFEM President), Stuart Smith (Economic Counselor to the Ambassador of the United States), Alyse Nelson Bloom (President of Vital Voices Global Partnership), and Judith Willson's opening remarks focused on supporting women's entrepreneurship and the need for women's economic empowerment in Morocco, the Middle East and throughout the world. In her remarks, Ms. Iraqui-Houssaini noted that 50% of women's enterprises in Morocco are small- to medium-sized businesses, which have difficulties remaining competitive in today's globalizing world. Therefore, she hoped that this conference would impart that knowledge needed to grow, compete and sustain one's business in the global market place. Stuart Smith spoke more about the larger picture of women's entrepreneurship and the vital role it plays in the economic growth and development of any country, stating that it is essential that we continue to build women's capacity in our own countries and around the world and provide them with the skills and tools to maximize their potential to contribute. Alyse Nelson Bloom echoed Mr. Smith's call to support women's entrepreneurship, stating that "we are at a tipping point in women's economic development, but still a great void or gap exists." Judith Willson emphasized these remarks in her speech, but focused more on the purpose of this event, adding, "business growth, job creation, community development, idea exchange and leadership skills are all critical to our success," and setting the tone for the panel session and workshops to come.



The panel session, moderated by Farida Moha, a brilliant journalist and reporter in Morocco, was both informative and spontaneous. The highlight was when Kathleen Diamond, a pioneer female entrepreneur herself, gave a very personal account of her story and the long struggle businesswomen in the U.S. have gone through to achieve the standing that they have today, and

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lauded Moroccan businesswomen for their significant progress in such a short amount of time. She then listed the statistics of businesswomen in the U.S., namely that there are 10.5 million women business owners who generate \$1.9 trillion in annual sales, one of the most dynamic and fastest growing sectors of the U.S. economy and an impressive illustration of American women's economic power and influential constituency, and called on Moroccan businesswomen to gather their own statistics to use as a tool to advocate further progress for women entrepreneurs. Judith Willson, in her panel remarks, emphasized this power of numbers and stated, "As women business owners and women leaders, we not only have the ability but the responsibility to lead change within our communities, regions and nations to support a global commitment to positive social transformations within our world." As an example of businesses contributing to social transformation, Sandra Taylor spoke about the global trend in Corporate Social Responsibility, a hot topic that spurred much debate during the workshop later that afternoon.



Lunch was followed by targeted workshops, wherein the U.S. Corporate Ambassadors joined Moroccan counterparts to share knowledge on human resources strategies, corporate social responsibility, IT and corporate growth, and strategic planning. The first workshop, entitled "Corporate Growth: 10 Things a CEO Needs to Know about Human Resources," featured Judith Willson, Kathleen Diamond and Abdelkerim Guergachi, Directeur du Pole Support at CDG Groupe, and Mohammed Benouarrek, Director of Human Resources for Novartis. Each presenter gave tips to leverage one's human resources for corporate growth,

from best hiring practices to retention strategies and principles in human resource politics. Since the majority of the audience was small- to medium-sized business owners, questions to the panelists tended to focus on how to balance their dual role as business owner/HR manager, as well as ideas for small businesses on how to retain staff when faced with competitive benefits packages from much larger firms. Judith Willson suggested offering professional development programs to staff, while Abdelkerim Guergachi emphasized the importance of respecting and appreciating one's staff equally.



The second workshop, "The Business Case for CSR: Integrating Community Commitments in Your Business Strategy," began with Sandra Taylor, a leading expert in this field, emphasizing that CSR is not just for multinational companies, but also for small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who can begin simply by investing in environmentally-friendly products, for example. "The benefits of being a CSR-driven company," she stated, "include long-term relationships with suppliers, the retention and satisfaction of employees, and the goodwill of

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the communities in which you live and work.” She then went on to detail how SMEs should go about developing and implementing CSR strategies for their business. Abdelmalek Kettani, President of the CSR Commission for CGEM, followed with a presentation on the CGEM’s efforts to promote CSR in Morocco by offering its label to be used by companies that adhere to its CSR Charter. Ms. Taylor and Mr. Kettani’s informative presentations were followed by testimonial accounts by Saloua Belkeziz, Director General of GFI Maroc, and Mouna Sabbahi, Director of Human Resources of LGMC, on how they implement CSR strategies in their businesses in Morocco. The questions by the audience that ensued focused on how to determine one’s CSR issue, but also included many examples by audience members of how they are already implementing CSR in their companies.

Feedback from attendees at both sessions was very positive and the consensus was that everyone enjoyed hearing from top-notch people in these fields. Twenty-three members of the press attended that day’s event, and that evening, the event got 2 minutes of coverage by Moroccan TV news (2M and Al Oula), and in the following days, articles covering the event were featured in *Le Matin*, *Aujourd’hui*, and *Al Bayane*, to name a



few.

Day Two began with a third workshop on “Using IT to Grow Your Business,” featuring presentations by Kathleen Diamond, Latifa Echihabi, Director General of the National Agency for the Promotion of SMEs (ANPME), and Hicham Laenser, Director of the Incubator at Technopark. Kathleen Diamond set the tone for the workshop by giving a very detailed and inspiring account of how she personally used IT to transform her own small company into a global competitor. She attested that after she made what was at the time a very significant and risky investment in IT, her company grew by fifty percent, and encouraged the audience to make the same investment. Ms. Echihabi and Mr. Laenser then laid out how their agencies support SMEs to integrate IT into their businesses and detailed the services on offer. It was a topic that struck at the core of one of Morocco’s main business obstacles, and the presenters were bombarded with questions by attendees concerned with understanding what kind of IT their company requires and finding the financing to make that investment. Participants’ concerns were answered, however, when Rabia Elalama, Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Morocco, stood up and declared a new partnership with AFEM to begin working on studies on impacts of selling on-line and assisting its members to get on-line and their websites in both French and English. Then, the workshop took another turn, as AFEM members seized the opportunity to highlight their advocacy issue and lobbied the ANPME to offer their services to more SMEs, especially those owned by women, and adopt more transparency within the agency. Ms. Echihabi responded that she was willing to hear AFEM’s concerns, but they need to present them to her in a cohesive and formalized manner,



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which they said they would.



Baze back to conduct a full-day training workshop on strategic planning for its members later on this year.

The final workshop focused on advocacy skills development, with Bouthayna Iraqui-Houssaini moderating a panel discussion and presentations on the challenges to advocacy in Morocco, passionately presented by Houriya Cherif Haouat, Director of Development at BMH Coach, and best practice strategies for implementing business lobbying strategies and corporate social responsibility activities, presented by Sandra Taylor. Both Ms. Taylor and Mayada Ani Logue, Director of the MENA Businesswomen's Network at Vital Voices Global Partnership, gave detailed accounts of their successes developing and implementing effective advocacy campaigns in the U.S. and abroad. Ms. Taylor specifically called on AFEM to create advocacy coalitions, bringing together all stakeholders in their advocacy issue, including both businesses and other non-profits, as the most effective advocacy strategy they can use to pass their issue. The attendees were then asked to write down specific issues they would like AFEM to advocate for on their behalf, and following this conference they would meet to choose a new issue and devise an effective advocacy strategy.



During the closing session of the event, Ms. Iraqui-Houssaini thanked all of the participants, partners and sponsors, and encouraged each participant to learn from these valuable workshops and take corrective action to begin implementing the best practices highlighted during each session. She also summarized recommendations resulting from each workshop, such as the integration of the CGEM CSR Label application file on AFEM's website and incorporating Emotional Intelligence into

one's HR strategy. She then asked each Corporate Ambassador made remarks, noting their most memorable impressions. Judith Willson stated, "We're all facing the same challenges, yet we're all getting to the same point as emerging leaders." Sandra Taylor remarked how impressed she was by how much Moroccan businesswomen are already doing in CSR, and reminded the audience that

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they don't have to compete with the multinationals; just do what they can to make their businesses socially responsible. Kathleen Diamond then called on AFEM to start counting themselves by conducting a gender-based study on women-owned enterprises; a tool they could use to empower themselves and advocate for continued progress. Mohammed El Manjra, Director General of Meditel, one of the event's main sponsors, aptly concluded the event by first applauding AFEM for the successful two-day event, and then appealing to the Corporate Ambassadors, "You came here as American Ambassadors; I sincerely hope that you go back as Moroccan Ambassadors."

Following the closing session, AFEM members had the opportunity to meet one-on-one with the Corporate Ambassadors to discuss challenges they face in their businesses in a private meeting. Both parties vowed to maintain the relationships they had developed over the past two days for many years to come.

A successful conclusion to a program that, throughout 2008, will expand to take delegations of senior women executives as Corporate Ambassadors from the U.S. to each country participating in the MENA Businesswomen's Network for a dynamic two-day program tailored for the Network Hub and its members. The programs, like this one, will include workshops, roundtable discussions, one-on-one meetings as well as specialized advocacy training on an issue critical to the Hub. The next Corporate Ambassadors event will take place in Ramallah, West Bank, on July 6 & 7, 2008.

