

RIDING THE TIDE

By Nadine S. Bartholomew

Woman-owned businesses assist in the Gulf of Mexico cleanup.



Jan Keffer

On April 20, 2010, just 40 miles off the Louisiana coast, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig operated by **BP** blew out and escaping methane gas exploded into flames, leading to a human, economic, and environmental disaster. Eleven workers died in the inferno and several others were seriously injured as fire engulfed and ultimately destroyed the rig. According to the government's estimates, by the time the Macondo well was sealed months later, over 4.9 million barrels of oil had spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. Reportedly, much of the oil was kept out at sea by winds and currents. But in terms of economic loss, health impact, and social as well as environmental damage, this event was a disaster that threatened livelihoods, precious habitats, and even a unique way of life for the Gulf states.

The importance of oil and gas exploration to the economy of the Gulf is not widely appreciated by many Americans, but within the region, the role of the energy industry is well-understood and accepted. The industry is woven into the fabric of the Gulf culture and economy, providing thousands of jobs and essential public revenue. However, an acute awareness of the competing interests of energy extraction versus a

natural-resource economy with bountiful fisheries and tourist amenities is also an integral part of the Gulf psyche.

Like Deepwater Horizon, many disasters can strike small businesses quickly and without warning. The Small Business Administration (SBA) reported that 25 percent of all businesses that shut down because of a disaster never reopen. However, according to the American Red Cross, it's 40 percent. The following stories profile five certified woman-owned businesses, based in the Gulf states, who aligned their products and services with the recovery effort in order to survive the economic crisis that followed the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. These women got involved and learned how to beat the statistics. They survived, and even thrived, in the wake of the disaster.

The ability of these businesswomen to transform information into insight, in response to market movements, was core to their survival. The stories that follow examine the challenges

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and rewards of organizational flexibility and agility. The major lessons learned were:

- Position your business to become the “outsource” source.
- Take quick action to provide new solutions to existing customers.
- Try new industries and target the customers of their customers.
- Consider reducing prices.
- Stay true to your core competencies.

Jan Keffer is the president and founder of **Bridgeway Temporary Housing, Inc.**, a certified woman-owned business based in Birmingham, Alabama. Keffer started her company in 2005, primarily working with insurance companies to provide their policyholders with temporary housing. A former property insurance claims specialist, Keffer has over nine years of extensive experience and connections in both the insurance and temporary housing industries. She has earned a reputation for truly understanding the responsibility of her clients, the demands placed on claims adjusters, and the importance of satisfying the special needs that policyholders might have during their crisis.

Shortly after the oil spill, Keffer received a call from a BP representative who was seeking a provider of temporary housing for 200 company executives and contracted workers, over a six-week time frame. Because she had not previously worked with BP, Keffer was asked to provide references, and to demonstrate her capacity to handle this project by giving BP a detailed plan of action including information for all of her contacts at hotels, apartments, houses, and condominiums within the region. The action plan took two weeks to develop and Keffer and her staff worked tirelessly to collect the information needed in hope of exceeding BP's expectations. Her specialized knowledge of disaster claims and her experience in housing the victims of recent disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, helped in the for-

mulation of the plan, enabling Keffer to present her ideas to BP ahead of schedule.

Bridgeway won a contract to provide temporary housing for 2,500 people within five staging areas—three located in Alabama including Dauphin Island, Orange Beach and Mobile, and two in Florida: Panama City and Pensacola. They provided a home-away-from-home for the Coast Guard, engineers, private contractors, volunteers, and many others working to improve conditions in the Gulf and to protect sensitive shorelines [areas that provide unique or critical ecological habitat].

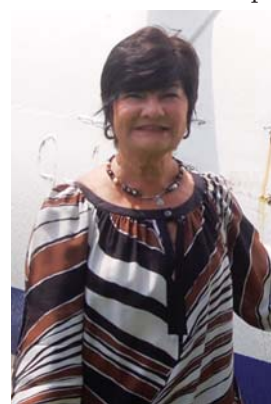
When times are tough, big companies are under pressure to reduce fixed costs, so for companies providing services usually handled by corporate in-house staff, it is a good time to help them see you as an outsource provider. Keffer acknowledges that BP could have used the information she provided in the bid to do the work themselves, “...but it was a risk I was willing to take for the opportunity to work with BP and to be a part of the recovery efforts in the Gulf,” said Keffer. This was the first time Keffer had worked with a client in the oil and gas industry, and she hopes it won't be the last.

Wet Tech Energy, Inc. is a current BP vendor/contractor and participant in the company's supplier diversity program. Incorporated in 1999, Wet Tech provides a variety of shelf mooring consultation and project management services including offshore mooring system installation, recovery, relocation, inspection, and equipment repair for over 100 firms in the Gulf region.

Jayne H. Carl, president and CEO, leads a team of dedicated engineers and experienced mooring project managers. When she heard about the oil spill, Carl gathered her team and started to brainstorm ideas for how they could help. “All of our staff joined in the brainstorming efforts. I

was very impressed with the level of ideas that they originated during these sessions. As we explored ideas for alternative cleanup technologies, I was moved by the creativity of my staff and their dedication to our company and the industry. We were able to implement some of the suggestions right away, and others served as jumping off points to even better ideas,” said Carl.

Equipped with the new ideas and solutions generated by her staff, Carl reached out to her contacts at BP and offered the services of her company. Wet Tech was able to provide creative



Jayne H. Carl

and cost-effective solutions to their long-time client when they needed it most. As a result, Wet Tech was contracted to provide additional equipment, personnel, boats, and boom to BP between May and December 2010. Wet Tech provided BP with four boats for use in the Vessels of Opportunity program, 26 staff members to help supervise the cleanup workers, and lots of boom.

Protective booming was being deployed throughout the Gulf, so boom was in high demand. Wet Tech also provided boom to other customers, including a few environmentalists doing research on the spill. According to Carl, the special equipment her company acquired for this project helped in the three basic activities used to control the oil spill: 1) containment, when non-absorbent booms were used to halt or ‘contain’ the oil slick on the water's surface (containment booms); 2) water-surface absorption, when absorbent booms were deployed to absorb the oil on the surface, retrieve, and then replace or reuse (absorption

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booms); and 3) coastal surface absorption, when large absorbent sheets/pads or 'wipes' are laid down along the coastline to absorb oil that made landfall (barrier booms).

Wet Tech found that when a precarious economic climate requires quick action, a company can open new avenues for growth by strengthening customer relationships and redefining what is truly core to its business. Carl and her team demonstrated expertise and capacity in a new business area and expanded the scope of their relationship with BP while helping communities in the Gulf region mitigate the risk of further environmental damage.

Amanda Weir Gifford is the president of **Weir Environmental, L.L.C.**, a full-service industrial hygiene and environmental consulting firm that provides a wide range of hazardous materials management and industrial hygiene services to municipalities and to insurance, real estate, banking, and retail businesses. A lifelong resident of New Orleans, Gifford started her company in 2008. It is now based in Houma, Louisiana, and her client base includes attorneys, insurance companies, property managers, government agencies, the local power company, and local universities and schools. Though she had not previously worked with the oil and gas industry, upon hearing about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, she felt compelled to get involved. She reached out to the supplier diversity program at BP to offer the services of her company with its staff of certified industrial hygienists and environmental health and safety specialists. Gifford was not awarded a contract with BP, but



Amanda Weir Gifford

she was able to subcontract with a Texas-based client who was working to provide temporary staffing for the cleanup efforts.

In tough times, large companies tend to cut back the opportunities for new suppliers or contractors. But one of their existing *small* contractors could be your *huge* customer. You can secure new revenue streams by targeting big corporations' small contractors and vendors, and by diversifying your products and services to fit the needs of a smaller operation. As a subcontractor to a BP subcontractor, Weir Environmental researched, identified, and recruited qualified individuals to staff the cleanup efforts along the Louisiana coastline. Ultimately, she provided 18 crew managers who, in turn, supervised large teams of cleanup workers in and around Grand Isle, Louisiana, from April to July 2010. Initially, Weir Environmental used their in-house expertise to train each new recruit. However, through a newly formed partnership with Dillard University in New Orleans, Gifford was eventually able to identify and recruit workers who already possessed the necessary skills and training to do the job.

In the aftermath of the oil spill, it was important for small businesses to concentrate on increasing sales and to continue looking for new channels and new customers. Although Gifford had not worked in the oil and gas industry prior to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the experience proved beneficial. Weir Environmental was recently awarded a contract to provide ongoing industrial hygiene training and monitoring services to ExxonMobil.

Sandra Senegal Purdom, owner of **QMS, Inc.**, is an active member of the community. With offices in Slidell, Louisiana; Hayden, Alabama; and Los Angeles, California; QMS provides clients with a variety of construction management, environmental management, and project management

services, including environmental assessments and remedial planning, health and safety consulting and training, and grant writing. A mechanical engineer by training, Purdom enjoys



Sandra Senegal Purdom

using her engineering background to find pragmatic solutions for her clients. After hearing about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Purdom contacted BP immediately. Concerned that the contracts would be awarded only to the largest companies, Purdom championed the formation of a consortium of smaller local businesses to build capacity and to qualify to bid on larger BP projects. She believed that forming strategic partnerships with like-minded entrepreneurs could help share the cost of the projects, share the labor, and also pool resources such as contacts and customers.

Although Purdom was not awarded a contract with BP, she did not give up. On the contrary, Purdom approached several of BP's contractors and service providers to see if she could work with them as a subcontractor, and eventually found success there. QMS was hired by a BP contractor to provide the mandatory health and safety training for cleanup workers who could potentially be exposed to crude oil and dispersants. The training sessions were approved by OSHA and included extensive information, such as protection against chemical exposure and understanding workers' rights.

Between May and August 2010, QMS trained approximately 250 people. Trainees included fishermen, college students, business professionals, construction workers, and day laborers, all anxious to get back to work. Initially, to stay competitive, QMS offered the 40-hour classroom training at a significant discount.

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While similar training usually cost \$400 to \$500, QMS initially reduced its prices to as low as \$125, but then increased them to \$325 by end of summer. According to Purdom, the biggest lesson she learned from her experience with the oil spill was how to reinvent herself and her company to align with changing economic conditions and revenue streams. Everyone is looking for a bargain, so you have to consider giving them one. Even providers of in-demand products and services are going to be caught in the economic squeeze, and their customers too will be looking to save. "To be successful, a small company must be nimble enough to follow the money," said Purdom.

Based in Daphne, Alabama, **EAP Lifestyle Management, LLC** is a company that specializes in providing comprehensive assistance program services, including counseling services and workplace seminars and training, along with legal and financial assessment and referrals. **Patricia "Patty" Vanderpool**, the owner of EAP, is trained and experienced in providing critical incident services when tragedy or natural disaster strikes the workplace. Vanderpool has extensive experience implementing and supervising employee assistance programs and in assisting employees and family members to resolve personal problems.



Patricia Vanderpool

Following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Vanderpool and her husband volunteered at Pensacola Beach during the early cleanup efforts. Although oil from the spill had not reached Florida

at that time, the community banded together to clean local beaches and wetlands of existing trash and debris that could have complicated later oil cleanup. Then in June 2010, a local fisherman turned cleanup worker killed himself after becoming upset about the oil spill and the loss of his business, which was caused by the closing of fishing grounds. This event brought the psychological impact of the oil spill into focus for local residents, and they demanded action.

Business leaders and government officials began expediting crisis and mental health counseling and other disaster-related services for their employees and the local community. EAP was enlisted to help develop on-site and off-site assistance programs to provide much needed counseling on stress management and on positive psychology (how to be happy), and even helped facilitate financial assistance where necessary. "I have been a counselor for several years and this was the first time in my career that I had seen more men than women in my sessions," said Vanderpool.

According to Vanderpool, it seemed that in a matter of weeks the situation in the Gulf of Mexico had become dire for the seafood industry. Fishermen who could make thousands of dollars a day fishing or running chartered tours on their boats before the spill were only making a few dollars an hour as cleanup workers. They were feeling stress on top of post-Katrina troubles. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill had effectively killed their livelihood and they had little hope that the fishing business would ever come back to the region.

The situation extended into other sectors as well. Construction workers reported feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work ahead of them

and cleanup workers reported despair and a lack of faith that they were making any impact against the oil that was threatening the waters they loved. "I was happy to be able to apply my skills and experience as a licensed professional counselor to help my community heal," said Vanderpool.

Now, eighteen months later, things in the Gulf of Mexico seem to be getting back to normal. The Gulf's valuable fisheries appear to have escaped the worst damage. Tourists have returned to the region, and the moratorium on deepwater drilling in the Gulf has been lifted. Though we simply don't know enough about what happened, and what may happen in the years and decades to come, it seems clear that the worst-case scenario never came true. It's not that the oil spill will have no lasting effects; far from it. But the ecological and financial doomsday that many feared did not arrive. There *is* recovery where once there was only despair, and the small business owners who rode the tide are now stronger and more connected with their customers and the community because of that experience. ♦

Nadine Bartholomew has over 12 years of experience developing, promoting, and facilitating corporate engagement in cutting edge issues, including seafood sustainability, environmental stewardship, health and wellness, supplier diversity, and community relations. Prior to forming the grassroots non-profit organization "The Good Foodie," she was the manager of business outreach and development for Seafood Choices Alliance.



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