

Doing Business with Uncle Sam: How to Win Government Work

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Expanding your sales market to include government contracts is worthy of consideration, even in a better economy. Regardless of how good a company is, however, there's a learning curve to becoming qualified to compete in this arena. If you decide to undertake this endeavor on your own, you're likely to waste a lot of time, become quite frustrated and may well end up spending money that you don't need to. What follows are some personal recommendations on how to proceed.

1. Read. There are a number of good books available on this topic. Win Government Contracts for Your Small Business by John D. Giacomo (ISBN 0808015796) is a good primer. Amongst other things, these books will help you to size up your business and determine whether you are, in fact, even prepared to compete in this arena.
2. Get Help. While many seem to prefer to learn the hard way...why? Most states have Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (www.aptac-us.org) that offer free or low cost procurement assistance. SC's PTACs are embedded in the State's 16 office Small Business Development Center network (SBDC, <http://scsbdc.moore.sc.edu>). There are a host of other support services available to small businesses (see www.sbaguides.com/pdf/english/southcarolina.pdf).
3. Get registered. Working directly with the federal government requires that you first register on CCR (www.ccr.gov). Beyond that, you should also complete BPN, GLS and ORCA. Note item 2, above.
4. Get certified. Many small businesses are eligible to apply for certifications based on geographic location or social and economic disadvantage. These certifications offer a competitive advantage in the procurement process. Quality certifications (e.g., ISO 9000) can also be important during the evaluation process. Note item 2, above.
5. Identify government buyers. As with the private sector, knowing just who you are trying to sell to can make a world of difference. Note items 1 and 2, above. Reaching your intended audience can sometimes be trickier (ever drive up to the gates of Ft. Jackson and tell them that you just want to look around for a bit?). Note item 2.
6. Identify opportunities. The corollary to this is to understand government pricing arrangements (contract types). There are a number of places you would want to check out to identify opportunities. Networking should be considered part of this process. Note item 2.
7. Learn contracting procedures. Reading a typical government solicitation can be, well, daunting. If you're curious, visit www.fbo.gov and see for yourself! To that, understanding the clauses that go with it can be almost overwhelming; there are something like 2,000 pages in the Federal Procurement Regulations (FAR, www.acquisition.gov/FAR). Note item 2.
8. Market your firm. Those that make it through the steps above all-to-often 'wait' for the government to contact them. While this can and does happen...the really

successful firms market to the government just as they would in the private sector.
Note item 2.

The bottom line is that the government buys most goods and services that are sold in the private sector. The keys to success are doing your homework, start small, build relationships, satisfy the solicitation and provide solutions. This all takes time but those that break into this marketplace tend to stay there for good reason.

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