



ARTICLE

MARKETING TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: THE BASICS

BY ROBERT KELLY

***PRACTICAL
TIPS AND
RESOURCES
FOR
DEVELOPING
YOUR
FEDERAL
MARKETING
PLAN***

In Brief

The Federal Government spends billions of dollars on commercial products and services – including IT services, training, HR Consulting, media and marketing, and engineering services. You name it, and the Federal government probably needs it. As time goes on, the Federal agencies increasingly look for outside assistance rather than performing these types of services “in house”. This article draws on official GSA information and explains the basics of Federal marketing in these days of more simplified procurement rules and conveys the message that marketing to Federal agencies can be quite similar to your traditional, commercial marketing practices. The article also provides ample web-based resources that can be helpful in launching a federal marketing strategy.

MARKETING TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: THE BASICS

PRACTICAL TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING YOUR FEDERAL MARKETING PLAN

By Robert B. Kelly, Principal, Client Dimensions

The Federal Government spends billions of dollars on professional services – including IT services, training, HR Consulting, media and marketing, and engineering services. You name it, and the Federal government probably needs it. As time goes on, the Federal agencies increasingly look for outside assistance rather than performing these types of services “in house”.

Federal government marketing has been thought of as quite complex, almost rising to the level of a black art. But the trend in government procurement is to make things simpler for both the Government and contract service providers. One example of this simplification process is the increased use of GSA Schedules, which were introduced a few years ago. GSA Schedules are quickly becoming the preferred procurement vehicle in government and makes marketing to Federal agencies similar to marketing to commercial clients (more information about GSA Schedules can be found at:

<http://www.clientdimensions.com/freeresources.htm>.

If you ever worked on a Federal proposal and rued the experience, then you will be pleased with the changes.

While procurement and contracting issues are less complex than in previous years, you still need to market your services. This article explains the basics of Federal marketing in these days of more simplified procurement rules and conveys the message that marketing to Federal agencies can be quite similar to your traditional, commercial marketing practices. The article also provides ample web-based resources that can be helpful in launching a federal marketing strategy.

PLAN A SUCCESSFUL MARKETING STRATEGY

You can market your services to government customers just as you market to your commercial clients. Establishing a marketing strategy at the outset will help you to reach your target audience much more efficiently, and ensure greater success. As in commercial marketing, you need a winning product or service, or in other words, the right technical solution. In addition to being strong technically, you must also be able to offer the best value to your Federal client. Fortunately, this does not mean you need to offer the lowest price. You need to offer solutions that, when all important factors are weighed, your client believes you offer the best deal. This does not mean that cost is irrelevant; your price still needs to pass the “smell” test and not be outrageous. But for professional services, best value beats best price most days. It’s up to you to support your “value” claims.

But what Agencies need your solution? The first step is to identify and segment the Federal government and identify specific target agencies. Sure you can try to “hit” all Federal departments, but you may find that the Federal government is pretty darn big these days! It is advisable to gain an understanding of Agency needs and evaluate your products and services in light of those requirements. Perhaps your service is so specific that it will naturally narrow down the number of agencies you might pursue. For example, if you offer hydrogeology services, then perhaps NOAA and EPA would be logical first candidates. If you offer physical therapy services, perhaps, then the VA may be a good

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place to start. If you offer more general services, then come up with criteria to better target agencies to be pursued within the next 12-18-24 months. The best, if not most basic advice, is to not bite off more than you can chew. Start with a few agencies and learn from those experiences. Construct a database in which to track federal contacts and opportunities, including names, addresses, and phone numbers of agency contacts and procurement personnel. And remember, whatever makes you unique in the commercial market probably makes you unique to the Feds, so apply some of the same thinking when it comes to targeting federal agencies.

Next, get to know these agencies before you call or visit. Look at agency web sites to learn about their mission and go to the individual program office web sites and read about what they do. Agency web sites typically provide a lot of information about what they do. Unlike commercial clients, most agencies also publish their anticipated future procurement needs so you can see if they have already identified a need for your type of service. The government's acquisition central web site links to most federal agencies procurement forecasts: (http://acquisition.gov/comp/procurement_forecasts/index.html)

If not, don't despair. Just as with commercial clients, agencies may not always know or identify all of their needs and when you ultimately start talking to prospects, you may help them to clarify their needs. Another difference with Federal marketing is that Agencies are more informative about competitors than the commercial sector typically is. For example, you can often find out if any of your competitors have done business with a certain agency by searching the Federal Procurement Data System (discussed below). You can also learn about contracts that pertain to your services that have been issued in the past.

Finally, most departments have an office that deals with small businesses that are quite willing to help you understand their agencies needs and direct you to the program office that might need your service. Don't you wish all

your clients would be so generous with such information?

Key Agency OSDBU sites include:

US Air Force OSDBU
www.selltoairforce.org

Defense Logistics Agency OSDBU
www.dla.mil/db

NASA OSDBU
www.hq.nasa.gov/office/codek

US Dept of Veteran's Affairs OSDBU
www.va.gov/OSDBU

US Dept of Agriculture OSDBU
www.usda.gov/osdbu

US Dept of Commerce OSDBU
www.doc.gov/osdbu

US Dept of Education OSDBU
www.ed.gov/offices/ODS

US Dept of Health & Human Services OSDBU
www.hhs.gov/osdbu

US Dept of Justice OSDBU
www.usdoj.gov/jmd/osdbu

US Government OSDBU Directors
www.usda.gov/da/smallbus/sbdirect.htm

US Navy OSDBU
www.hq.navy.mil/sadbu/default.htm

US State Dept OSDBU
www.state.gov/m/a/sdbu

While comprehensive listings of agency OSDBU sites change from time to time, this site should be maintained on a regular basis:
<http://www.osdbu.gov/offices.html#U.S.%20Department%20of%20Commerce>

FEDERAL MARKETING PLAN ELEMENTS

This plan should outline how you are going to penetrate the very different government market. Your marketing plan might include the following:

- ❑ Identify the size and scope of agency opportunities to be pursued within the next (12, 18, 24) months.
- ❑ Construct a spreadsheet or database in which to track these federal opportunities, including supplemental information to be developed (e.g., names, addresses & phone numbers of agency contacts and procurement personnel).
- ❑ Prepare print and online materials marketing your company. If you are a GSA Schedule contractor (see below), include the GSA logo to promote your company's benefit of being on a GSA schedule. Electronic downloads are available at www.gsa.gov/marketingpartnership.
- ❑ Obtain copies of expiring contracts, if possible.
- ❑ Contact procurement, technical, and program manager personnel to begin building relationships.
- ❑ Attend Workshops and training programs to further develop presentation skills, to better understand the federal purchasing processes, and to improve your proposal preparation skills.
- ❑ Visit FBO, e-Buy and other online and responding to RFQs listed under your SIN. (<http://www.ebuy.gsa.gov>)
- ❑ Cold call and solicit government buyers to disseminate information about services and products.
- ❑ Attend industry trade shows to meet potential customers.
- ❑ Pursue subcontracting opportunities with already established government contractors. One good source for opportunities is <http://web.sba.gov/subnet> while contacting major prime contractors directly is another good idea.

SO WHO SHOULD YOU TALK TO?

Once you have identified your target agencies and have done some preliminary research, you should begin some preliminary sales activities. Early on, look at this as an opportunity to learn more about the agency's needs and not focus on your need to sell. Agency bureaucrats understand you would like contracts; what you need to do is convince them that you really want to understand their problems so that you can offer a solution. This helps build credibility and long term relationships. Talking to the technical people in the individual program offices is very important since they ultimately have great influence over what work is done and which contractors are selected.

If your research identified past contracts that encompassed services like your, talk to the contracting office's technical representative (COTR, pronounced *co-tar*) and see what problems were solved under that contract, what remains to be done, or what new issues are emerging. Be direct and ask what they are planning to do in the future.

Once you've done your homework and determined that your products and services will benefit the agency, you should then turn your attention to becoming the provider that the client "wants" to win. You do this by building a professional relationship with the people in the agency. There's no magic to establishing such a relationship. Just as in commercial marketing, you need to become known to the client, establish credibility, meet with them to understand their needs and issues, and demonstrate your ability to solve those problems. You cannot establish yourself as the provider of choice by sitting back and responding to RFPs. Those days, if they ever existed, are long gone.

WHO ARE THE BUYERS?

Typically, federal customers fall into one of three categories:

1. Contracting Officers (CO) or Contracting Specialists
2. Program Managers
3. End-users

Contracting Officers and Specialists are a key part of the contracting process. They are needed to ensure proper implementation and formulation of the task order. Contracting officers draft the task order requests, establish blanket purchase agreements, evaluate contract proposals and make a best value decision

Contracting Officers/Specialists are often the ‘gate-keepers’ to the Program Managers and end-users. The Program Managers know what they want, but turn to their Contracting Officer/Specialist to get the materials and/or services they need. The CO gives advice on the best way to procure those services and verifies that the materials and/or services are procured according to regulations. Therefore, the CO is a key customer who has influence over the Program Manager/end-user and selecting the contracting method.

TurboGSA provides contact lists of contracting and purchasing personnel, grouped by product and service codes. To learn more, visit <http://www.turbogsa.com/fedcontactslist.htm>

The **Program Manager** is typically the visionary. Program Managers set the requirements for what they need to enhance their program and provide those requirements to the end-user. Normally they’ve been given tight deadlines, and these deadlines are passed on to the end-user. They are short staffed and need reliable, high-quality contractors to supplement their staff. They are accustomed to working with quality contractors and selecting from a pool of resources. They want a variety of quality contractors to select from, regardless which mechanism they use. They are unsure of the procurement process and turn to their Contracting Officer/Specialist for help. In many

instances Program Managers rely on their contractors for procurement guidance and for advice in getting the services they need in the quickest fashion.

The **End-User** is ultimately interested in obtaining the most qualified contractor. They have been given tight deadlines and want the quickest way to procure these products or services. Most end-users are confused about the procurement process and turn to their Contracting Officer/Specialist for help. End-users are accustomed to working with good companies and want that same kind of service. They don’t care how they get the contractor on board – they want the quickest mechanism to get the contractor – and being a GSA Schedule contractor facilitates that. End-users still want to be in charge of the selection of the contractor and they want to remain the key contact in the working relationship with the contractor.

HOW DO YOU FIND GOVERNMENT CLIENTS?

How do you find Government clients? By conducting market research, you can find out which Federal agencies are procuring your professional services. Listed below are six sources that provide important data about potential federal clients:



Federal Procurement Data Systems: <https://www.fpds.gov>

The Federal Procurement Data System Next Generation (FPDS-NG) is the central repository of statistical information on Federal contracting. The system contains detailed information on contract actions over \$25,000 and summary data on procurements of less than \$25,000. The Executive departments and agencies award over \$200 billion annually for goods and services. The system can identify who bought what, from whom, for how much, when and where.

FedBizOpps (www.fedbizopps.gov) - This is the free, government-wide point of entry for procurement opportunities, having been designated as the single source for federal government procurement opportunities that exceed \$25,000. In bygone days, the Commerce Business Daily (CBD) used to be a subscription based service that provided this information, but now the government provides it directly at no cost. By signing up to automatically receive procurement information; by solicitation number, selected organizations, and product service classification, vendors can react more quickly to procurement opportunities because they are better informed. Vendors can also search procurements by solicitation number, date, procurement classification code, and agency for active or archived solicitations. Currently, FedBizOpps has 140,000 registered vendors who receive e-mail notification about opportunities -- roughly 50,000 e-mails are sent out daily. FedBizOpps has 51 agencies (17,400 contracting officers/specialists) posting to its website. As alluded to earlier however, the growth of GSA Schedules as a preferred procurement vehicle may one day minimize the number of traditional procurements listed in FedBizOpps.

FedBizOpps allows you to be more proactive than FPDS by allowing you to see a job before it has been awarded. If you know that an agency is posting a solicitation, you can let them know, before award, that you can provide that type of service. And if you have a GSA schedule and can do the work, it is sometimes possible to convince them to use your schedule rather than pursue a traditional procurement.

Central Contractor Registry (www.ccr.gov) - If you want to do business with the Federal government, whether with civilian or defense agencies, you must register your firm at this web site. It only takes 30 minutes or so to complete the registration and there is no charge for registering.

ORCA (<https://orca.bpn.gov/>) - ORCA is an e-Government initiative that replaces the paper based Representations and Certifications (Reps and Certs) process.

Private Sector Alternatives - While FedBizOpps and FPDC, provide valuable information for free, some private sector companies take such government data, combine it with additional research and analysis, and provide additional valuable market information. While not free, and frankly quite expensive by small business standards, these services can be quite useful. Some services contact Federal procurement offices years in advance of a procurement which enables you to establish a presence with the client well in advance of the procurement's release. Some private sector firms offering these services include:

Eagle Eye Publishers (www.eagleeyeinc.com)
 Input (www.input.com)
 Carroll Publishing www.carrollpub.com
 ePipeline www.epipeline.com
 GovExec's Directories
<http://www.govexec.com/directories/>
 Leadership Directories
www.leadershipdirectories.com

DO YOU HAVE A CONTRACT IN PLACE, SUCH AS A GSA SCHEDULE?

The GSA Multiple Awards Schedule program enables businesses to obtain government contracts without the need to respond to costly open procurements and contract administration. You should consider getting into the GSA Schedule program since it:

- Helps avoid open competitions
- Enables you to apply your commercial marketing practices to the Federal market
- Minimizes complex Federal contracting issues
- Provides marketing cache
- Has become the contracting vehicle of choice for procurement officers.
- Shortens the time for Agencies to issue contracts to you (about 14 days compared to 268 days for conventional Federal contracts).

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- Provides you with GSA marketing support (free mailing lists, free advertising in GSA's magazine, listing in GSAdvantage, and exposure to multiple government procurement sites).

For more information about this program, visit:
<http://www.turbogsa.com/aboutgsa65.htm>

RESOURCES TO ACTIVELY MARKET YOUR FIRM

The above information is great for market research and finding current opportunities. The following resources are valuable for marketing communications and networking. Resources listed include: SBA's Pro-Net, good mailing lists, associations and forums, conferences, publications, and other websites.

SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (SBA) PROCUREMENT MARKETING AND ACCESS NETWORK (PRO-NET)

Pro-Net (www.pro-net.sba.gov) - Pro-Net is an electronic gateway of procurement information for small businesses. It is a search engine for contracting officers, a marketing tool for small firms, and it provides links to procurement opportunities. Pro-Net is an online database of more than 195,000 small, disadvantaged, 8(a) and women-owned businesses. It is available to Federal and state government agencies as well as prime and other contractors seeking small business contractors, subcontractors and/or partnership opportunities. Pro-Net is open to all small firms seeking Federal, state and private contracts. Businesses profiled on the Pro-Net system can be searched by: SIC or NAICS codes, ownership race and gender, key words, location, quality certifications, business type and EDI capability, as well as other search parameters.

Business profiles in the Pro-Net system include data from SBA's files and other available databases, plus additional business and marketing information on individual firms. Businesses on the system are responsible for updating their profiles and keeping information current. Profiles are structured like executive

business summaries, with specific data search fields designed to meet the needs of contracting officers and other potential users. Profiles provide vendors an opportunity to put a controlled "marketing spin" on their businesses. Companies may link their web site's homepage to their Pro-Net profile, creating a powerful marketing tool.

Pro-Net also serves as an electronic gateway, Pro-Net provides access and is linked to the FedBizOps (FBO), agency home pages and other sources of procurement opportunities. The system is also linked to key sources of information, assistance and training.

MAILING LISTS

There are commercially available sources that may be worth your consideration, in addition to the private sector firms listed above:

- Federal Contact Lists:
www.turbogsa.com/fedcontactslist.htm
- Dun & Bradstreet: www.dnb.com

SMALL BUSINESS MARKETING TOOLS

TurboGSA

<http://www.turbogsa.com/fedsales2.htm> - Competing in the Federal market takes work, but working smart is essential for small businesses with limited time and resources. Make smart choices in deciding on the proper mix of traditional marketing tools and techniques. Site offers a range of reasonably priced services and tools that are ideal for a small business' federal marketing effort.



TurboGSA Plus - a Complete Resource for GSA Schedule contractors.

TurboGSA Plus was designed to help small businesses do just that by providing frank, common sense advice to your most pressing problems. In addition to explaining how to better manage your contract, this site also provides useful tips on marketing to the federal government. www.turbogsaplus.com



ASSOCIATIONS & FORUMS

A number of associations may be worth your involvement:

Federal Executive Boards (www.feb.gov) - The Federal Executive Boards (FEB) were established in 1961 by a Presidential Directive to improve coordination among Federal activities and programs outside Washington. The FEB's perform highly valuable functions. They provide: a forum for the exchange of information between Washington and the field about programs, management strategies, and administrative challenges; a point of coordination for the development and operation of Federal programs having common characteristics; a means of communication through which Washington can strengthen field understanding and support of management initiatives and concerns; and Federal representation and involvement within their communities.

CONFERENCES

Many conferences and meetings that target the Federal Government audience are worth attending or exhibiting. If you do, you will be sure to get the word out about your company's skills and association with GSA:

The Excellence in Government Conference (www.excelgov.com) - The Excellence in Government Conference has earned a reputation as the premier public management event. Its top-rank keynote speakers and carefully designed breakout sessions attract participants

who want to learn about, discuss and improve emerging solutions to the most pressing problems facing the public sector. The event is a joint project of Government Executive magazine, the Council for Excellence in Government and 16 other "good-government" organizations.

Professional Services Expo- PSX

(www.psx-expo.com) - Although the Post Newsweek group spearheads this show, GSA is the primary sponsor. GSA provides a training and exhibiting extravaganza aimed at both Government and industry partners on a host of topics important to understanding and using the GSA Schedules program effectively when purchasing professional services. This conference is typically held in February in the Washington, DC.

GSA Expo (www.expo.gsa.gov) - GSA's Federal Supply Service sponsors an annual free-training seminar for GSA customers and potential customers. The Expo provides an opportunity for contractors to display their products and services that are available through GSA Schedules. The Expo also features over 100 hours of training on the latest updates in procurement regulations and on using Schedules. Booths are usually released in November. Contact your GSA Acquisition Center marketing representative for more information.

PUBLICATIONS

Depending on your marketing budget, there are various options you can take for advertising your company's capabilities to the Federal Government. These publications may also offer opportunities for you to find out more about who is doing what in the Federal Government. These publications include:

Federal Marketing Newsletter

(www.clientdimensions.com/newsletter.htm) Free newsletter that contains tips, advice, and information on becoming a better Federal marketer and business developer.

Government Executive (www.govexec.com) An online service of Government Executive Magazine)

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Federal Times (www.federaltimes.com) - Managed by the Army Times Publishing group. They are also responsible for other newsweeklies such as; Army Times, Navy Times, Marine Times, Air Force Times and Defense News.

GSA MarkeTips (www.fss.gsa.gov/partnership) - then click on MarkeTips) - GSA MarkeTips is a bimonthly magazine for GSA customers. Current distribution is approximately 90,000 subscribers. Advertisements are free for Schedule contract holders, but subject to certain specifications and space availability. Additionally, you must receive an invitation from your GSA representative to submit an advertisement.

Armed Forces Journal (magazine, www.afji.com) - Armed Forces Journal is a monthly magazine focusing on the business of national defense for career military officers and top-level defense authorities in government and industry.

Contract Management (www.ncmahq.org) - Contract Management, the official publication of the National Contract Management Association (NCMA), is a monthly magazine edited for industry and government contract managers, procurement professional, officers and administrators. It also addresses the concerns of program managers, industry executives and other secondary market professionals.

CONCLUSION

There is no magic or secret to selling to the Federal Government. You still need to segment markets, target agencies, sell the benefits of your solutions, demonstrate credibility, and establish/maintain relationships with your customers. Being on the GSA schedule gives you added benefits, but it does not guarantee that you get the business. You still need to aggressively market your services to your target market(s). For more information about developing Federal business, please visit: <http://www.turbogsa.com/fedsales2.htm>

OTHER USEFUL WEB SITES

Federal White Pages: www.directory.gov - A free service to find Federal employees by name, and find their telephone numbers and/or their e-mail addresses in 21 Departments & agencies.

Federal Marketing Resources www.clientdimensions.com/freeresources.htm - Federal business development articles, papers, newsletter, and other items you may find useful.

FirstGov: www.firstgov.gov - FirstGov.gov, the official U.S. gateway to all government information, is the catalyst for a growing electronic government. You can search more than 51 million web pages from federal and state governments, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. Most of these pages are not available on commercial websites. FirstGov has the most comprehensive search of government anywhere on the Internet.

Federal Employment Statistics: www.opm.gov/feddata - The Office of Personnel Management serves as the authoritative source for statistical information on the size and composition of the Federal civilian workforce. OPM offers customers free electronic publications that contain hundreds of tables and charts; and specialized services (fee may be required) for customers who need additional data or statistics.

ABOUT CLIENT DIMENSIONS / TURBOGSA

Client Dimensions / TurboGSA is an industry leader in providing innovative services to help firms grow federal business. We provide personalized, direct assistance to business owners and staff. Our clients appreciate the time our principal consultants put into each project-- we do not pass off all the work to junior staff after the sale. Our fees are reasonable and assured, so you do not have to worry about the meter ticking as we work through important issues.

Client Dimensions is committed to helping businesses succeed in the Federal marketplace.

Call Robert Kelly, at

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www.clientdimensions.com.

or

www.TurboGSA.com