

A Step-by-Step Approach to Entering the Federal Acquisition Marketplace

By Gloria Berthold Larkin



Doing business with federal government agencies can be very lucrative for the people who learn how to maneuver through the maze of registrations, certifications and regulations. When you are ready to start, these are the first steps you need to take to open the door to federal business opportunities.

1. Identify your product or service

It is necessary to know the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code and the Federal Supply Classification (FSC) code for your product or service. Most federal government product/service listings and procurements are identified by their NAICS code and/or FSC code. You can find the codes relating to your business at these websites: NAICS codes: at <http://fpdcapp.gsa.gov/pls/fpdsweb/PscWiz>

2. Confirm your business size status as either small or large

Check with the Small Business Administration (SBA) to determine if your business is considered as a large or small business in the eyes of the federal government. You can go to <http://www.sba.gov> to see if your business falls within the established table of small business size standards based on your NAICS. You may be very surprised just how big a company can be and still be considered "small" in the eyes of the federal government. If you are a small business you will use certain strategies and tactics. If your business is large, you will use a different set of strategies and tactics for success. For direct access visit:

<http://www.census.gov/epcd/naics.html>

<http://www.sba.gov/contractingopportunities/officials/size/index.html>

3. Obtain a DUNS number from Dunn & Bradstreet

This is a business identification number that is used by businesses to separate your business from every other business in the world. If you do not have a DUNS Number, contact Dun and Bradstreet to obtain one

<http://www.dnb.com> There is no charge for assigning a DUNS number for government contracting use and you must have one to proceed.

4. Register in the central contractor registration (CCR) system

You must be registered in CCR to be awarded a contract and get paid from any federal civilian or military agencies. CCR is a database designed to hold information relevant to procurement and financial transactions. CCR also affords you the opportunity for fast electronic payment of your invoices. Go to: <http://www.ccr.gov>. *Note: If your business is "small" make sure to also go to the SBA's Pro-Net page at the end of CCR registration and complete your profile there as well. This is the resource that is used to find contractors.

5. Determine if your firm qualifies for 8(a) or HUBZone certification

These socio-economic certifications are detailed at <http://www.sba.gov>. They are essentially for companies that are owned by individuals who have experienced some sort of disadvantage in the business environment. This may be based on economic factors, race or geographic location. Firms with these certifications may compete for set-aside contracts – those contracts specifically designated only for certified companies.

6. Register in online representations and certifications application (ORCA)

ORCA is an e-Government initiative that was designed to replace the paper-based Representations and Certifications process. This will be a central repository of all of your company's certifications and can be accessed by any federal agency at: <http://orca.bpn.gov>.

7. Begin to search for current Federal Government Procurement Opportunities

Identify current procurement opportunities in your product or service area by checking at the FedBizOpps website, the federal civilian and military government single point-of-entry for many opportunities over \$25,000. Once you start to search for current open bids you will get a good feel for the market for your products and services. <http://www.fedbizopps.gov>.

8. Familiarize yourself with the legal requirements of doing business with the Federal Government

The Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) can be found at <http://www.amet.gov/far/>.

The Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS) is located at <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/dars/dfars/index.htm>. These are the legal regulations for federal acquisitions. While they are not “light reading” if you are serious about federal procurements, you need to know and understand the legal requirements and regulations pertaining to federal contracts. This is a good time to look for an attorney who is experienced in federal procurement policies.

9. Investigate if “Getting on the GSA Schedule” is right for you

Federal agencies can use General Services Administration’s (GSA) Federal Supply Service (FSS) Schedule Contracts and Government Wide Acquisition Contracts (GWACs) to make purchases. These pre-approved contracts are used to buy commonly used products, services, and solutions needed to fulfill their missions and day-to-day operations. These opportunities are rarely announced on the FedBizOpps site in Step 7 above, but are normally competed amongst pre-qualified vendors already under contract: <http://www.gsa.gov>.

10. Use free and/or low cost help when available

Seek additional assistance, as needed, in the federal civilian and/or DoD marketplaces. Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs) are federally-funded organizations located nationwide that offer free or low-cost help. PTACs can be found at: <http://www.dla.mil/db/procurem.htm>.

11. Familiarize yourself with the budget forecasts for your targeted agencies

Each federal agency typically produces an Annual Procurement Forecast, as required by the Small Business Act, which is maintained by their Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) or equivalent. You may contact each agency OSDBU for specifics. Use this budget to determine if they are good prospects for you: <http://www.firstgov.gov>.

12. Explore subcontracting opportunities

Regardless of your product or service, it is important that you do not neglect a very large secondary market – subcontracting opportunities through prime contractors. Although there is no single point of entry for subcontracting opportunities in the federal civilian procurement marketplace, SBA’s

SUB-Net is a valuable source for obtaining information on subcontracting opportunities. Prime contractors, government, commercial, and educational entities, may post solicitations or notices here: <http://web.sba.gov/subnet/index.cfm>.

For the Department of Defense (DoD) – The Office of Small Business Programs (OSBP) website lists all major DoD prime contractors by state and provides a point of contact (Small Business Liaison Officer) within each firm. Investigate potential opportunities with these firms. Many of these firms also have websites that may be useful. Partnering with a prime contractor as their subcontractor can be an excellent entry platform to the federal marketplace: <http://www.acq.osd.mil/osbp/>.

13. Investigate government programs

There are several SBA programs that may be of interest to you, such as the 8(a) Business Development Mentor-Protégé Program, the Small Business Innovation Research Program and Small Business Technology Transfer Research Program and the Technology Resources Network: <http://www.sba.gov>.

There are several DoD programs, some derived from the aforementioned programs, that may also be of interest to you, such as the Mentor-Protégé Program, the Small Business Innovation Research Program, and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority Institutions Program. Information on these and other programs is available on the OSBP website: <http://www.acq.osd.mil/osbp/>.

14. Market your firm to the right contacts

Identifying your prospective government customers, researching their requirements, and familiarizing yourself with procurement regulations and strategies require determination, direction, discipline and resources. There are many procuring organizations to consider, and educating yourself about their roles and missions will be no small task, but essential nonetheless.

When it is time to market your product or service, present your capabilities directly to the people who buy what you sell. Wherever possible, arrange marketing visits to agency project and program personnel. Provide your Capability Statement to key personnel within the agencies. Many Federal agencies hold small business fairs that emphasize how to do business with the government and provide information regarding their program activities. Realize that, like your own, their time is valuable and limited. If the match is a good one, you should be able to provide them with a cost-effective, quality solution to their requirements.

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