

I Have a GSA Schedule: What Do I Do Now?

Perhaps the most common question asked by any small to mid-size enterprise that has recently acquired a GSA Schedule is expressed in the title of this article.

When you realize that approximately 20% of the Schedule holders account for approximately 80% of all revenue derived from these Schedules, the obvious question becomes: What are the successful Schedule holders doing that I am not?

The seemingly mutually exclusive attributes of assertion and patience need to be present. Assertion is required to doggedly discover those agencies, programs and personnel that constitute many of the essential elements in any sale to the Government. Patience is the sense that the Government moves slowly in the acquisition phase of completing a contract action. This fact leads to the first of 3 essential steps (**Discovery, Planning and Execution**) that form the foundation of virtually any successful effort in government sales.

Step 1: Discovery

The three components of Discovery are:

1. **How is the Government buying the solutions we are selling?**
 - Is the buying centralized or decentralized?
 - Who makes the buying decision? End user, Contracting Officer, or combination of both?
 - What contractual vehicles do they prefer? GSA Schedules, Basic Purchase Agreements, Agency or Government-Wide Multiple Award Contracts?
 - Does the acquisition shop have preferred providers of this class of product?
 - Are your products being purchased through large agency-wide or government-wide acquisition contracts? If so, how do you become a participant?
 - Is the buying done directly or is it imbedded as part of a larger program (e.g. large design and construction buy) where the buyer is another company?
2. **Where are my competitors focused?**
 - Where have your top 3 or 5 competitors made the bulk of their sales?
 - What contractual vehicles or entry points are they using?
 - What is their “value proposition”?
 - Who do they deal with in their top accounts?

3. **Who is buying what we are selling?**

- Who are my prime targets? (Example: Department of Defense, Civilian and Independent Agencies, Intelligence Agencies, Quasi-Government Agencies)
- Is the buying done by Tier 1 and 2 Government contractors (e.g. CSC, Northrop Grumman) that hold or compete on large-scale programs (contracts) or by small business prime contractors?
- Is there a “middle-man” that manages pre-qualified contractors?

Each of the identified targets must be pre-qualified and ranked in order of importance. While these action items sound sufficiently straightforward, the fact is that a great deal of research and “shoe leather” is required to obtain valid, comprehensive answers that permit us to proceed intelligently in our quest for Government sales.

The third question “Who is buying what you are selling?” or “How do you determine what agencies to focus your limited resources on and why?” can be challenging.

This is no easy task and it takes a great deal of research of both past and forecasted buying to narrow the target agencies. For the most part, every agency in the federal government is theoretically a customer. However, based on your service or product offerings there are some ways to narrow down the field. Examination of Exhibits 53 and 300, as submitted to OMB, can provide valuable insights into the status of proposed IT acquisitions from virtually any agency.

First, do your comprehensive research and match your past performance to agencies that are performing similar types of services. For example, if you have experience in implementing SAP Financials, then you would search for Agencies using the SAP platform and, within this group, search further for those who have “Financials” as one of their Agency’s requirements.

If you are in the health care business then your logical target civilian departments are probably Health and Human Services and its member agencies, along with the Department of Veterans Affairs, who is one of the largest providers of medical services in the USA.

If construction management is your specialty then organizations like the Army Corps of Engineers, Navy Facility Engineering Command, Air Force Center for Engineering and the Environment, and GSA Public Building Service may be the place to start.

If you are a small business look for agencies that are committed to setting aside purchases for small business and small disadvantaged businesses like 8(a)s, service-disabled veteran-owned, veteran-owned, Hub Zone, and women-owned. Look at the grades each agency has received based on meeting their small business goals.

Often, agencies identify mandatory small business participation in major acquisition programs. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs Transformation Twenty-One Total Technology (T4) Program is an upcoming multiple award contract vehicle to provide comprehensive, world-wide, IT solutions to support both VA and non-VA customers. The VA has mandated that 30% of all contract dollars shall go to small business.

In summary, the **Discovery** step is where you need to do your homework, focus and narrow down your targets. It's not easy but you need to prioritize even if you have unlimited resources.

Step 2: Planning

In the Planning step, we address the question: "Where do you start and why?" The plan is, in large part, the distillation and application of substantive findings from the Discovery phase. This involves a detailed set of actions that are measurable with a focus on agencies, major acquisition programs, contracting vehicles and teaming partners. The plan allows for assigning responsibilities to individuals who are intrinsic to the marketing and sales efforts.

Don't under-plan, yet don't over-plan. The plan should become a working document, not a novel nobody wants to pick up and read. The requirement that each element in the plan needs to be completed is perhaps the biggest hurdle to actually enter information into the plan.

Market research services, GAO reports, trade publications, participation with affinity groups such as IAC, AFCEA, and SAME constitute some of the essential assets to use in the planning process. The Federal Procurement Data System is another tool that can be invaluable in determining what programs to target for buyers of your services or products as it provides an historical record of all non-intel agencies' procurements.

For example, let's assume you are a small engineering company specializing in Building Code Compliance services. During Discovery you identified that the top 4 agencies ranked by demand for your services are: Army Corps of Engineers (ACE); Navy Facilities and Engineering Command; GSA Building Services and Housing and Urban Development. Further, you determined that your specialized services are typically procured as part of a larger program.

Since you have limited resources you decide to focus on the ACE. An important part of your plan is to determine where to start. Organizationally, the ACE has 9 Divisions comprised of 44 Districts and numerous research, engineering and design centers. Construction projects are contracted and run in each Division and District. Given this organizational structure, you need to determine what districts have the programs and budgets that mesh with your firm's portfolio of offerings. In addition you need to determine what contracts have been awarded and which one's are in the planning stage. One thing is for certain, many of the top large and small engineering firms have already established a "beach head" in these Divisions and Districts so teaming becomes an important part of your plan.

At the risk of being repetitive, we cannot emphasize sufficiently the importance of focus. While there will always be pop-up opportunities which will reasonably require attention whether or not they are contained in the game plan, for effectiveness, these should be the pursued as the exception and not the rule.

With few exceptions, the highly successful small to moderate size businesses have had focus on Government programs as the one constant attributes of their planning.

Step 3: Execution

Execution focuses on how you are going to implement the plan with your available resources.

Let's go back to our example of the small engineering firm that specializes in Building Code Compliance services. We identified during planning the top four agencies buying this service with the top being the ACE. Further, assume the company is based in Virginia. Based on its location, we determined that the North Atlantic Division and its Districts (New England, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Norfolk) would be our primary targets. Further research indicates that two key ACE mission areas, Military Construction and Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC), were the best fit for the services being offered. Based on contracts awarded and program responsibilities, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Norfolk Districts manage the bulk of the construction and BRAC programs for this Division.

Here, we want to focus on the end customer, namely ACE, and the prime contractor community in parallel. It is best to always meet key customer POC's prior to meeting with prime contractors. Knowledge of the customer, its current and future programs and challenges they are facing goes a long way to establishing credibility and being considered a player with prime contractors.

For ACE there are many touch points to consider such as Program Management, Directors of Engineering, Construction, Contracting and Small Business Offices. Each can provide a wealth of information, guidance and intelligence you just cannot easily acquire on the web. Often, you can garner who the quality companies are that are currently working at the Division and/or District which will make your teaming much easier and successful. You can also find out about opportunities that have not yet been posted or discussed in planning documents as well as immediate needs for your services. You never know until you make the meeting.

For the contractor community, compile a list of the contract awardees in these three Districts including large, small and small disadvantaged businesses including 8(a), ANC, SDVOB and HUB Zone. In addition, develop a list of upcoming programs that are in the planning stage. These are our teaming partner targets. They have existing contracts that theoretically have funding and potentially a need for our services. Since they are already working in one or more Districts it's a good bet they are also targeting upcoming programs.

With smaller companies the target is the President or CEO. With larger companies we must determine where in the Bureaucracy to focus. A good starting point is the person responsible for managing existing ACE contract(s). This person is motivated to provide quality services to the customer and ensure that the project stays on budget. Another is the VP of Business Development, who is responsible for capturing future programs.

Here is where your value proposition needs to be succinct and compelling. Remember, they may or may not have a teammate that does what you do. If they do, they may not be happy with the services they are receiving from their source.

Remember one important fact, nobody buys over the phone. Get a meeting so you can start to develop a relationship.