

Primed for Success

Attention to detail, the right products and perseverance lead to success when using a GSA Schedule to market your business.

by Patrick J. Suarez

“WHAT’S YOUR GSA CONTRACT NUMBER?” For veteran-owned business owners unfamiliar with the General Services Administration’s Multiple Award Schedule program, this question can be a deal-killer: No GSA schedule, no contract. Once most veteran business owners hit this brick wall, they normally hurry to www.gsa.gov to learn how to “get on schedule.”

GSA schedules, or contracts (the terms are synonymous), are five-year agreements between the GSA and your company. They are intended to provide your goods or services to government agencies, through GSA’s www.gsaadvantage.gov Web site, a sprawling electronic shopping mall. GSA has more than four dozen schedules, which cover a wide landscape of goods and services.

THE UPSIDE OF HAVING A SCHEDULE

The most important aspect of having a GSA schedule is that it is a pre-award survey of your company. The process of getting on schedule examines your goods and services, past performance, accounting system and other factors that are key to declaring your company a reliable contractor to the federal government. With your schedule as a calling card, you may approach any federal agency and present your company as a trustworthy contractor.

CREATING A SUCCESSFUL GSA PROPOSAL

Visit www.gsa.gov and click on the “GSA Schedules” link on the home page. Select the correct schedule, download the solicitation, print it and be ready for the significant diligence, document-gathering and proposal-writing skills required by these complex documents. Read everything carefully and use a highlighter to point out areas that need responses or clarification.

Writing a proposal with which GSA finds favor is daunting. Requirements are scattered over more than one hundred pages of documentation, and the forms are written in somewhat confusing terms.

A GSA proposal that leads to a contract is complete (you found and submitted all the required information), accurate and, for proposals that require technical volumes, those technical volumes are written flawlessly and succinctly.

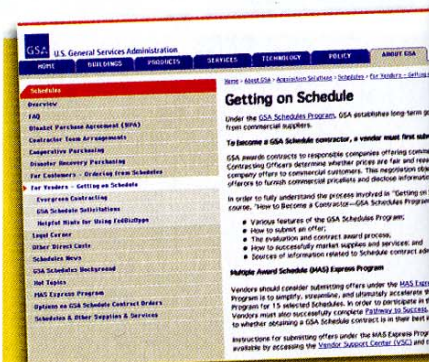
Most solicitations demand such peripheral documentation as Open Ratings reports, ORCA and CCR verification, financial records, letters of supply from companies that provide you with finished hardware you resell, and sophisticated pricing reports that show your retail price, your discounts to favored customers and proposed prices to GSA.

Asking GSA for help can be frustrating. GSA is desperately understaffed and overworked. If you reach a contracting officer, he or she will not have the time to answer dozens of questions, and they certainly know nothing about your company. Non-government, private companies exist to help you write a proposal that finds favor with GSA, just as accountants help taxpayers submit acceptable tax returns every April.

You will not have your GSA contract within a couple of weeks. The proposal process takes at least a few months. Tack on two to four months for GSA’s review and negotiation. If you compete for a traditional contract and then learn that the agency requires a GSA schedule, you probably will miss out on that award, but others will follow once you have your schedule.

GSA is experimenting with programs that help shorten the review procedure. For companies that manage to submit flawless proposals, the road to a GSA contract is shorter with these programs. GSA is slowly expanding and tweaking them to emphasize efficiency in the proposal review process.

GSA allows the electronic uploading of some proposals, alleviating the drudgery of printing hundreds of pages of paper. The system, called “eOffer,” is Web-based and free. Visit <http://eoffer.gsa.gov> to learn how you can get an electronic key to upload your proposal. **V**



Realistic Expectations

Just having a GSA contract is no guarantee of immediate sales success. Some companies do see rapid results, but you might not tally your first sale for several months. To maximize the potential of your schedule, do the following:

Market smartly. Target agencies that use your goods and services. Remember that a GSA schedule is not a handout or an entitlement. Your goods and services must help agencies accomplish their missions.

Get help. Visit your local PTAC office and contact the small business advocate offices that reside within federal agencies.

Think nationally. Even if you live two miles from a major government installation, there are countless offices outside your region that might use what you sell.

Market your business. Create a well-written trifold, with a capabilities statement, and include your schedule number prominently on it. GSA schedules are required passports for sales to hundreds of federal agencies, especially during the government’s late summer buying frenzy. The proposals are not easy to write, but attention to detail, the right products and perseverance lead to success.