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## Small Business Builder: Serving Big Clients

### Mining Government for Small-Business Opportunities

**Third in a Series**

**By Mary Campbell**

**May 30**

Maybe you've read about those \$20,000 government trash bins and thought, "Gee, I wish I could sell wastebaskets to Uncle Sam."

There's a good chance you can  although probably at market prices rather than mega-markups. Many government agencies, as well as large corporations, are eager to buy from small businesses.

It's up to you to make the connection, because purchasing agents don't go door to door looking for small businesses as a source of No. 2 pencils or copier-repair services. But if you persistently invest the time and effort  do your homework, find a mentor, network and nag  you can capture a share of the billions of dollars in corporate and government purchases.

Look to SCORE

The federal government spends \$2 billion a year for products and services. If you want to be one of its suppliers, or to bid on business from large corporations, here are some things you can do:

Make sure you qualify as a small or minority business (or both).

Learn about available contracts.

Follow the bidding and (if you're chosen) performance guidelines.

There's help if you need it  and you probably will, especially for government work. If the bureaucratic jargon, complicated instructions and fine print don't scare you off, you could drown in "set-aside soup"  overlapping but underenforced small- and minority-business procurement requirements for federal agencies.

Not sure where to start? Try the nearest SCORE office or Small Business Development Center. Check out the National Minority Supplier Development Council or the Women's Business Enterprise National Council; among other resources.

You'll find people who make careers out of helping people like you land government and corporate contracts.

Most of what follows applies to government contracting. Next week's column will offer advice for connecting with corporations.

Navigate the System

When looking to connect with the federal government you first should determine how to qualify. If a business is small, even "very small"; if it's in a HUBZone or if the owner qualifies as disadvantaged, disabled, minority or female, there's probably an available federal contract preference.

For example, according to the May 23 Commerce Business Daily (a summary of federal contract opportunities), the Cincinnati Veterans' Administration Medical Center plans to award a contract for maintenance of a color copier.

The contract is "potentially reserved," says the CBD announcement, "for HUBZone 8a, 8a, HUBZone Small Business, Very Small Business and Small Business participation." If those categories yield no qualified bidders, the "procurement is unrestricted."

The federal government is supposed to award at least 23 percent of its prime-contract money to small businesses (the meaning of small varies by industry) and 5 percent of its contracts to certified minority- and woman-owned businesses.

To explore where your business might plug in, you can:

Visit the Small Business Association's "certifications" Web page and follow links for details, applications and names of "private certifiers."

Take a quickie course or two (such as "Small Business Opportunities in Federal Procurement" and "Certification Programs") in the SBA online classroom.

Spend some time online with the U.S. General Services Administration, the "business manager and purchasing agent for the world's largest customer." There are sites devoted to small business and "enterprise development" □ advocacy for "today's small, minority, women, HUBZone and service-disabled Veteran business owners.

Monitor the Marketplace and Publish Your Presence

Once you determine how your business might fit into available programs, it's time to narrow your search:

Search Commerce Business Daily or GSA's "FedBizOps," both available online. In CBD, take note of upcoming events, such as the June 28 "Procurement Conference for Small Business" in Providence, R.I., where "small businesses, small disadvantaged and women and minority-owned businesses" [can] meet and network with federal and state agencies and major purchasers."

Register your "vendor profile" online with the GSA's Office of Enterprise Development.

Register in GSA's electronic posting service to receive procurement announcements via e-mail.

Sign up for the fedmarket.com electronic newsletter.

Register in the Phoenix Database and numerous other supplier databases. Most are free.

If at first you don't succeed, keep in mind that you're engaged in a learning process, and the rules keep changing. Network with other small businesses that have won contracts. Consult trade and industry groups in your field, find an agency contact willing to work with you and check out available free or for-fee resources. And marshal your own resources so that, when you finally land that big contract, you'll be ready.

Next week: Connecting to corporations.

An editor since the age of 6, when she returned a love letter with corrections marked in red, Mary Campbell founded Zero Gravity in 1984 to provide writing, editing and marketing services. Small Business Builder is published on Wednesdays.

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