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Opening Up Your World

Thanks for taking time to read our GSA Steps, Volume VII, the first GSA newsletter dedicated to our business partners. We created this newsletter to try to keep you better informed to what is happening in GSA. Hopefully, it fulfills that purpose. Thanks for being our partner. You are our "face" to the customer.

What Makes a Good Proposal?

Things to Avoid

Here are several "good proposal" tips gleaned from the people who evaluate proposals on a daily basis:

- You will be more successful if you actively pursue a few tasks than if you take a scattered shot at many. Concentrate on the ones that involve your core expertise, are set at the dollar levels you prefer for the work you do, and are in an area in which you have confidence that you can be an outstanding performer. Then, learn as much as possible about the agency before you walk in the door; know as much as possible about the agency's business (their website is a great place to start), and customize your presentation to the agency's needs.

Note: Be certain to send the other agencies polite letters that thank them for their interest, and specify that you are not currently in a position to pursue this task, but that you hope to respond to future requests.

- Submit all information specified in the Request for Proposals (RFP).

- Fully and specifically address all evaluation criteria in a meaningful, detailed way that directly relates to the task.
- Check for spelling and grammatical errors, and make your proposal easy to follow.
- Make sure to submit your proposal by the due date/time. If you must hand-deliver your proposal, allow plenty of time for passing through building security. There is never an excuse for submitting a late proposal. Always have it there by the proposal due date/time.
- If you are not clear about an aspect of the RFP, call the ordering official and request clarification. Do not be surprised if the ordering official asks you to confirm the question in writing and then shares the question and answer with all of the contractors on the RFP.
- If you decide not to submit a proposal, tell the ordering official why. The ordering system used by GSA allows you to electronically submit your reason for not responding to the RFP.
- For oral presentations, do not put overly detailed technical information on slides—it makes it difficult for the evaluators to read and follow.
- Clearly state any assumptions you have made in preparing your proposal and any exceptions you are taking.
- Canned presentations usually do look just like that: canned. Agencies are not looking for generalities; they are looking to see if

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you really understand their objectives.

- Stick to any specified page limitations.
- Concentrate on explaining what you understand the task to be, and how you will complete the job, on time and on budget.

And, here are what those same people said were common mistakes:

- Incomplete proposals
- Vague or broad terminology, rather than specific and detailed information
- Misspelled words, incomplete sentences, poor grammar
- Late proposals
- Being determined to sell your existing solution without considering, or even knowing, the agency's problems or objectives
- Name dropping
- Poor use of oral proposal time. Too much time spent on marketing the company and its history and not enough time on the specific details of your solution
- Failure to address quality control plans, managerial oversight and other aspects of contract management

A Word about Proposal Evaluation

Evaluations usually are not based on price alone. Customers most often want the optimal blend of quality and price, and for complex acquisitions, the customers usually want a

“total solution.” In most cases, they do not have the resources or technical expertise in-house to buy and integrate the pieces.

Oral Proposals and Presentations

You may be asked for an oral proposal in lieu of a written proposal, or to make an oral presentation in addition to a written proposal. Oral proposals and presentations can be mutually beneficial to the government and the contractor. They often save time and money for both parties. Technical and management aspects of your proposal may be better understood when explained orally. Some agencies videotape or transcribe the oral proposals and use that content to document and enforce contract performance.

Because of the strict integrity associated with the procurement process, acquisition personnel must remain objective and unbiased. Government procurement officials must avoid improper personal relationships, gifts or any appearance of impropriety, but the face-to-face relationship is still significant to a long-term partnership.

This, of course, does not address all the things that you may encounter in developing a “good proposal,” but hopefully it provides some insights on the mysteries associated with them.

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However, there is hope yet because this article provides you with the latest acquisition policy news on changes affecting your public sector business. They are as follows:

Acquisition Regulations Update

Electronic Representations and Certifications, Final Rule

The FAR Council issued a final rule on electronic representations and certifications that was effective on January 1, 2005 (69 Fed. Reg. 76340). This rule requires offerors to submit representations electronically via the Business Partner Network (BPN), unless certain exceptions apply. This rule adds FAR subpart 4.12 Annual Representations and Certifications

to FAR Part 4 Administrative Matters, which includes the requirement to complete annual representations and certifications at <http://orca.bpn.gov> in conjunction with the required registration in the Central Contract Registration (CCR) database. The electronic representations and certifications are effective for one year from date of

submission or update to ORCA. In the future, GSA solicitations will be refreshed and contracts will be modified to include the necessary revised Clauses to implement electronic representations and certifications. A copy of the final rule, including FAC-01-27, is available at <http://www.acqnet.gov/far/FAC/fac2001-26.pdf>

Acquisition Policy Updates

You are a busy GSA contract holder. You are marketing your GSA contract, educating ordering activities on your contract, performing contract administration, responding to RFPs, and completing current task and delivery orders. Accordingly, with all of this going on, it is hard to keep up with the latest acquisition policy changes affecting your GSA contract.

Waiver of Consequential Damages and “Post Award” Audit Provisions, ANPR

GSA has issued an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR) requesting comments from both Government and industry on whether the General Services Administration Acquisition Regulation (GSAR) should be revised to include a waiver of consequential damages for contracts awarded for commercial items under the FAR. In addition, GSA is requesting comments on whether “post award” audit provisions should be included in its Multiple Award Schedules (MAS) contracts

and Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts (GWAC). Interested parties should submit comments by May 10, 2005, to: General Services Administration, FAR Secretarial (MVA), 1800 F Street, NW, Room 4035, ATTN: Laurie Duarte, Washington DC 20405, or, to submit electronic comments via the Internet, to: gsaanapr.2005-N01@gsa.gov. A public hearing was held on April 14, 2005, to ensure an open dialogue between Government and interested parties on this topic. A copy of the ANPR is available at <http://www.arnet.gov/GSAM/gsamproposed.html>

Free Trade Agreements—Australia and Morocco, Interim Rule

The FAR Council issued an interim rule amending the FAR, specifically regulations on the Buy American Act at FAR Part 25-Foreign Acquisition, to implement new Free Trade Agreements with Australia and Morocco, which was effective on January 1, 2005 (69 Fed. Reg. 77870). This interim rule allows Contracting Officers to purchase products of Australia and Morocco without application of the Buy American Act if the acquisition is subject to Free Trade Agreements. A copy of the interim rule, included in FAC-01-27, is available at <http://www.arnet.gov/far/facsframe.html>

Federal Acquisition Regulation Reissued, Notice

The 2005 FAR was reissued and available for use on March 18, 2005, at <http://www.acqnet.gov/far>. A notice was published in the Federal Register on March 10, 2005. Periodically, the FAR is reissued because of administrative necessity, such as the removal of headers and change bars. A FAR reissue does not revise the FAR language, but the flow of the context changes. Accordingly, FAR users, including GSA contract holders, should refer to this latest version. The notice is available at <http://www.arnet.gov/far/ProposedRules/proposed.htm>

Extension of Authority for Use of Simplified Acquisition Procedures for Certain Commercial Items, Test Program, Final Rule

The FAR Council issued a final rule extending the authority for use of Simplified Acquisition Procedures for certain commercial items, test program, which was effective on April 8, 2005 (70 Fed. Reg. 11740). This final rule amends FAR subpart 13.500 in paragraph (d) by removing “January 1, 2006” and adding “January 1, 2008” in its place. Accordingly, this extends the timeframe until January 1, 2008, in which an agency may use simplified procedures to purchase

commercial items in amounts greater than the Simplified Acquisition Threshold, but not exceeding \$5,000,000 (\$10,000,000 for acquisitions as described in FAR 13.5 (e)). A copy of the final rule, including FAC 05-01, is available at <http://www.arnet.gov/far/facsframe.html>

Case Law Update

Two recent General Accountability Office (GAO) Bid Protest decisions highlight the importance of adhering to the scope of your GSA contract. These decisions can be used as guidance to GSA contract

holders in ensuring orders placed under your contract are within scope.

In American Systems Consulting, Inc. B-29464, December 13, 2004, the protester protested the issuance of a task order for IT Professional Services under Schedule 70 arguing the services were outside the scope of the Schedule contract. In this case, GAO ruled that where a portion of the services is outside the contract, then the agency must use competitive procedures to procure them. Accordingly, GAO sustained the protest and recommend that the agency evaluate the quotations to determine whether the services identified in the vendor’s quotations appear in their respective FSS contract. The agency may also reopen discussions and seek revised quotations as a result of that review. A copy of

A FAR reissue does not revise the FAR language, but the flow of the context changes... FAR users, including GSA Contract Holders, should refer to this latest version.

the case is available at <http://www.gao.gov/decisions/bidpro/294644.pdf>

In KEI Pearson, Inc., B-294226.3, B-294226.4, January 10, 2005, GAO ruled that when the solicitation required that all items or services be on a Federal Supply Schedule (FSS) schedule, the contracting agency improperly issued a task order to a vendor whose quotation was based on purchasing software products outside the framework of the FSS. Accordingly, GAO sustained the protest. A copy of the case is available at <http://www.gao.gov/decisions/bidpro/2942263.pdf>

Although you are a busy GSA contract holder, this article has provided you with updated acquisition policy news concerning your GSA contract. To be a successful contractor, it is important to be knowledgeable on the latest acquisition policy changes affecting your public sector business. To learn more, please visit the referenced websites contained in this article.

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Contractor Teaming Arrangements Can Help You Stay Within Scope

Has a customer approached you with a schedule order that required products and/or services that were not covered by your contract? Have you passed up quoting on a RFP because you did not have all of the products and/or services on your schedule contract(s) to provide the total solution that the customer was looking for? Do you find yourself needing to add many non-contract Other Direct Costs (ODCs) to respond to customers RFPs? Do you want to grow your customer base without going into new business lines?

Well, if any of these situations have happened to you, consider using Contractor Teaming Arrangements (CTAs) to help meet your customer's needs. By teaming with other schedule contractors, you can provide a total solution to the customer while still complying with the scope of your contract. With GSA's continued emphasis on customer agencies complying with the scope of contracts and use of CTAs, expect customers to demand contractors use CTAs rather than non-contract products, services or ODCs.

To find potential schedule partners, start your research using Schedules e-Library (www.gsaelibrary.gsa.gov) to look up contractors on the SIN(s) where you need product and/or service support. You should set up CTAs for routine products and/or services so that you can respond to routine RFPs quickly. Then, establish a written CTA that clearly identifies the team lead, each team member, and covers the roles and responsibilities of each member, administrative costs, warranty issues, and addresses invoicing and payment.

When you use a CTA to respond to RFPs, make it clear to the customer which contractor is providing each product and/or service. Be sure the response to the RFP includes all of the contractor team members' contract numbers.

Additional information on CTAs, as well as answers to Frequently Asked Questions, can be found by going to www.gsa.gov and searching on "CTA."

Mass Mods

You have probably heard of Mass Modifications (Mass Mods), and you may have even

participated in a Mass Mod, but do you actually know what they are and why GSA is using them. Check out below:

What is a Mass Mod?

Mass Mods (Mass Modifications) are Government-initiated contract revisions developed to eliminate the paperwork and snail-mail burden associated with traditional paper modifications.

When are Mass Mods used?

Mass Mods are initiated when uniform changes to large segments of the FSS contractor community are required. Examples include solicitation refreshes and the addition of contract requirements. Other than contract-specific information, Mass Mods are identical for all recipients.

How does a contractor know a Mass Mod is available?

When a modification becomes available for review, the contractor point of contact is sent an e-mail with a direct hyperlink to a portion of the FSS Vendor Support Center (VSC) website that contains the modification acceptance process. The e-mail also contains a unique Personal Identification Number (PIN) that is required to access the modification for purposes of security and verification.

Additional Information

Anyone viewing the VSC website (<http://vsc.gsa.gov>) can review and choose from a list of modifications available. Detailed information educates the reader on the background, purpose and implications of the modification. At the conclusion, the contractor enters the PIN and other verification information as a means of accepting the modification. Upon execution, a confirmation email containing a printable SF-30 is sent to the Contractor, ACO and PCO.

eBusiness Information and other eStuff

Let's Talk About Digital Certificates

What is a digital certificate?

A digital certificate is a digital identifier linking an entity and a trusted third party who is able to confirm the entity's identity. It verifies the identity of an individual, organization, or Web server, and ensures non-repudiation in business transactions. The digital certificate is also used to encrypt or decrypt data to ensure that it is securely transmitted and it creates digital signatures, which are verifiable.

Why do I need a digital certificate?

An OMB (Office of Management and Budget) Level 3 Assured Digital Certificate is needed to use the eOffer/eMod system. Digital certificates enable us to verify the identity of the individual entering the system and signing the documents.

Who can get a digital certificate?

Anyone with a web browser and e-mail program that supports the use of digital certificates can get a digital certificate.

Where can I get a digital certificate?

- Digital Signature Trust (DST):
<http://www.digsigtrust.com>
- Operational Research Consultants:
<http://www.aces.orc.com>

Will the digital certificate expire?

The digital certificate expires within two years after receipt. A notification will be sent prior to expiration to arrange for a renewal.

A digital certificate is a digital identifier linking an entity and a trusted third party who is able to confirm the entity's identity.

Additional Information

For additional information regarding digital certificates please visit <http://www.digsigtrust.com/support> or <http://www.aces.orc.com>. For a digital certificate overview, please visit <http://eoffer.gsa.gov>.

Now Let's Discuss eOffer

What is eOffer?

eOffer is a Web-based application that allows companies to electronically prepare and submit a MAS contract proposal to FSS.

How do I access eOffer?

eOffer homepage: <http://eoffer.gsa.gov>

What is the purpose of eOffer?

The purpose of eOffer is to create an interactive, secure electronic environment that simplifies the contracting process from submission of proposal to awards. eOffer enables a seamless transmission of data from the vendor community to the FSS contracting offices.

How are eOffer documents signed?

Offerors are able to sign electronically using digital certificates (ah HA!) and create a legally binding electronic contract.

eOffer is available to:

- Schedule 70 (Information Technology)
- Schedule 541 (Advertising & Integrated Marketing Solutions)
- Schedule 871 (Professional Engineering Services)
- Schedule 520 (Financial Business Solutions)

Coming in May 2005

Schedule 874 (Management Organizational and Business Improvement Services)

What About eMods? (Applies to all Multiple Award Schedule (MAS) contracts)

What is an eMod?

eMod is a web-based application that allows MAS contractors to electronically prepare and submit contract modifications to FSS.

When would I use eMod?

Currently, there are seven modification type requests:

- Add SINs
- Delete SINs
- Add Products/Service
- Delete Products/ Service
- Price Reductions
- Economic Price Adjustments
- Administrative Changes

How do I access eMod?

eOffer homepage: <http://eoffer.gsa.gov>

Who initiates eMod?

The contractor initiates the modification process.

What is the purpose of eMod?

The purpose of eMod is to streamline and expedite the modification process and to create an electronic modification file.

Benefits of eBusiness

- **It's eSimple:** User-friendly screens that simplify the submittal process. Improves the efficiency of the acquisition cycle, reduces data entry, and manual validation of contract proposals and modifications
- **It's eSecure:** Digital certificates ensure the integrity of your proprietary data
- **You will eSave:** Electronic process reduces delivery costs and delays

The purpose of eMod is to streamline and expedite the modification process and to create an electronic modification file.

- **You can eShare:** Web-based technology facilitates your team's collaboration on proposal preparation. Creates an electronic means of viewing and storing proposals and modifications
- **You can eSign:** Electronic signature creates an electronic contract or modification for fast retrieval

Training on eOffer/eMod, as well as additional information, may be found by visiting our website at <http://eoffer.gsa.gov> or call GSA, Federal Supply Services, System Management Center HelpDesk at 866-472-9114, or e-mail us at eoffers@gsa.gov

in early June and the tentative date for Industry Day (demo of the system, training and Q&A session with policy and system experts) is June 17, 2005 (details will be coming soon). When the ESRS system is totally operational, contractors will be directed to www.esrs.gov. Soon thereafter, FSS will begin accepting automated subcontracting plans through our Vendor Support Center (VSC) website at <http://vsc.gsa.gov>. This will further help us to monitor the subcontracting program and to negotiate goals and plans more quickly.

Federal Supply Service Unveils New and Improved Supply Report Card!

Subcontracting Update

The GSA Federal Supply Service (FSS) is committed to increasing attention to small business subcontracting programs. We have improved our own internal data collection processes to capture key fields from manually submitted Subcontracting Plans into our primary mainframe system. We continue to collect automated SF294s and SF295s for contracts from selected acquisitions centers. All of the Administrative Contracting Officers in the FSS Contract Management Center (ACOs) have had training in administering subcontracting plans and FSS is currently developing a more comprehensive training program.

FSS has representation on the implementation team for the Government-wide Electronic Subcontracting Reporting System (ESRS) and is working to ensure that there are capabilities for contractors to upload their subcontracting data into ESRS via system interface. This will eliminate all manual entry on the part of the contractors. ESRS is planned to be operational

The Supply Report Card reflects a current snapshot of the prime contractor's performance, with data from all suppliers.

Successful government/vendor relationships stem from clearly defining the government's expectations, conveying this message to our vendors, and evaluating contract performance based on these expectations.

Enter the Supply Report Card—a revised rating system designed to help GSA Global Supply re-establish a base

with reliable and competent contractors and identify qualified suppliers with a known acceptable performance history. Highlighting performance will help GSA minimize backorders and frustrated freight, decrease procurement costs, and improve delivery to distribution centers and customers alike.

The Supply Report Card reflects a current snapshot of the prime contractor's performance, with data from all suppliers, emphasizing the following critical areas:

- **Delivery:** To include the number of orders placed, shipped dates compared to due dates, Show Cause Notices issued for late deliveries, total delinquencies, and causes of delays

- **Quality Issues:** Numbers (for the past three years) of Quality Deficiency Notices, GSA Form 308 Rejections, Quality Cure Letters, Quality Holds, and Justified Complaints issued
- **First Article Testing:** Compliance with the required date and revisions
- **Packaging/Packing/Marking:** Summarizing all documentation of marking and packaging/packing problems
- **Terminated Orders:** To include the total number of orders placed and the number and causes of terminations
- **Modifications:** Summary of modifications to extend delivery, change in production points and Change of Name/Novation Agreements
- **Business Management:** General summation of the contractor's compliance with key administrative terms and conditions, such as Central Contractor Registration and compliance with subcontracting plan goals and reporting

The revised rating system will help ensure contractors understand what GSA expects, leading to improved performance.

buyers meet the requirements of the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) when it's time to exercise options, negotiate performance improvements or better pricing, and help evaluate new offers from known vendors.

Some Global Supply vendors will begin seeing this new Report Card as early as May 2005. Initially, completed Report Cards will be distributed, by e-mail, to the contract administrator of record. In the future, the Report Cards will be stored and accessed through GSA's Vendor Support Center website. In accordance with FAR 42.1503, contractors will be provided 30 days to submit comments, rebutting statements, or additional information before the Report Card is finalized. These comments will be coordinated and resolved by the Administrative Contracting Officer (ACO). It is anticipated that the impact on industry will be positive, as FSS will clearly define its expectations. Outstanding contractors will be identified and will be able to market this distinction.

Contractor's Corner

12 Steps to a Competitive Proposal*
By Larry Closs, Director of Operations
Gesso, www.gesso.net

1. Read the RFP Carefully: Highlight and review language, requirements, specifications and evaluation factors that might identify a need for specific products, services, experience or expertise.

2. Ask Questions: A comprehensive and competitive proposal starts with a clear Request for Proposal (RFP). Make sure you have all the information you need to write a quality proposal. If the RFP's stated approach, scope, tasks, timeline, terms or deliverables

The data will not be scored or weighted, allowing individual buyers to consider what is most important to their commodity.

Customers, contractors, and the Global Supply program itself will all benefit from active contract performance management. The revised rating system will help ensure contractors understand what GSA expects, leading to improved performance. Outstanding contractors will be able to use the rating to pursue additional business. The Report Card will help FSS

are ambiguous, ask the Contract Officer (CO) if you can submit questions for clarification. Read the buyer's responses to questions submitted by all contractors.

3. Set-Asides: Is the solicitation set-aside for any of the following business types: small, woman-owned, service-disabled-veteran-owned, veteran-owned, 8(a) or HUBZone? If so, does your company qualify?

4. Budget: To assist in preparing a cost proposal, try to determine the size of the solicitation: Is it a micro-purchase, for contracts up to \$2500? Is it a Simplified Acquisition Procedure (SAP), for contracts between \$2501 and \$100,000? Is it more? Also, is the requirement for a firm fixed price or time-and-materials?

5. Discounts: If your company offers any types of discounts, be sure to include them in your budget. They might give you an edge over the competition.

6. Formatting: To ensure that your proposal is not disqualified for improper formatting, make sure you follow the RFP directions to the letter. Do you need to prepare both a Technical and a Cost Proposal? If so, do they need to be separate documents? Can you e-mail them? If hard copies are required, how many copies of each?

7. Your Company: Include a brief overview of your company, a list of services and a list of clients.

8. Teaming: Identify all teaming arrangements and

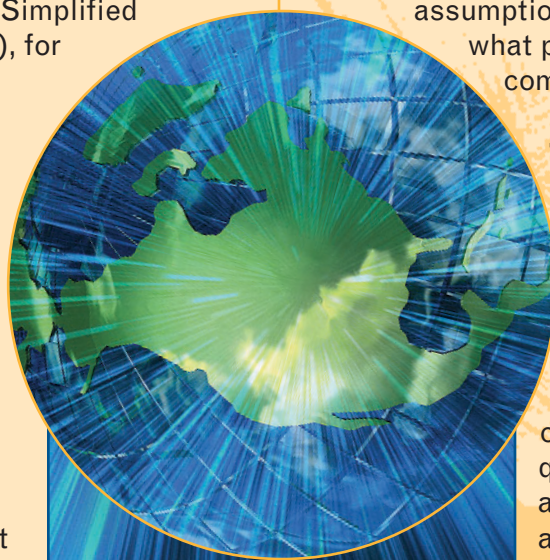
subcontractors, which you anticipate using.

9. Approach: What approach does your company propose to achieve the goals of the solicitation? How is your approach unique? Specifically address all tasks and deliverables.

10. Assumptions: In a list of assumptions, outline the mutual dependencies, if any, that timely delivery of your company's products and services depends upon. Also, if any aspect of a project's scope, tasks, timeline, terms or deliverables remains unclear (even after submitting questions to the CO), state assumptions that delineate exactly what products and services your company will provide.

11. Past Experience & References: Include relevant examples and case studies of projects that are similar in scope to the one you are bidding on as well as a list of references thoroughly familiar with your company's capabilities and quality of work. Call them in advance to check their availability and to let them know that they may be contacted in the near future.

12. Request a Debriefing: If you don't get the award, always ask for a debriefing to find out why. It may help you prepare a better proposal next time.



Is the solicitation set-aside for any of the following business types: small, woman-owned, service-disabled-veteran-owned, veteran-owned, 8(a) or HUBZone?

***Note**

The views expressed in this article are shared by Gesso and do not necessarily represent the recommendations of the Government or GSA.