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## Are You Submitting a Proposal to GSA?

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### 10 tips to help you get started.

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Winning a contract with the General Services Administration (GSA) is an essential step for many firms that want to:

(1) sell products or services to the federal government for the first time; or (2) grow and diversify their federal business base. Any federal government agency can use these contracts—which can have 20-year periods of performance, attractive rates, and no ceilings. Many agencies prefer using GSA-approved contractors to any other contracting mechanism. The numbers reflect this trend. Many firms routinely book millions of dollars worth of sales annually under their GSA contracts.

**Has your firm decided to obtain a GSA contract?** Pursued efficiently, you can win a contract within a few months. Knowing how to start can be hard, however, especially for firms not familiar with the federal market. Here are 10 tips to help you get launched.

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**1. Choose the right products and services to offer.** Getting a GSA contract can be ideal for some of your products and services while being less ideal for others. This depends on many factors, such as your pricing; your ability to comply with basic requirements (such as the Trade Agreements Act); whether you are considered "small," which varies by different products and services; and the extent to which you use dealers and resellers.

**2. Choose the right contract to pursue.** GSA has dozens of "schedules" for products and services, and you don't want to win a contract that isn't strategically right for you. Which GSA contracts are used the most by the agencies with which you want to do business? Which contracts have your competitors won? Which contracts have the most activity?

**3. Do your homework, even on SINs in which you qualify.** A SIN that looks right for your firm might be a poor choice—for example, because federal agencies rarely, if ever, order products or services under that SIN. And some seemingly irrelevant SINs might be precisely the ones that would make most sense for your firm. The bottom line: do your homework. If you don't understand how federal agencies use the contract or find the wording of some SINs to be ambiguous, check with GSA or someone who has expertise in the contract.

**4. Check for updates.** For each of its schedules, GSA issues a separate RFP. Every now and then, GSA will revise—in their terms, "refresh"—an RFP. GSA typically does not give advance notice of its intent to refresh an RFP. Once the refreshed RFP is issued, firms have only a 30-day grace period to finish their current proposals and submit them to GSA. After that, firms have to adhere to the new RFP. It is bad business to invest substantial resources in its proposal against the then-current version of a GSA RFP, not understanding that GSA is just about to issue a revised version. In many cases, the firm simply can't finish its current proposal in 30 days—and, therefore, much of its current investment is lost. The lesson: be sure to have a good understanding of whether and when the RFP for "your" GSA contract is being revised.

**5. Which "you" is proposing?** In many cases, it makes sense for a division or other sub-unit of a firm to be the proposing entity, rather than the entire firm. This issue usually is closely tied to your pricing strategy.

**6. It is never too early to strategize on pricing.** Firms typically can negotiate relatively good pricing terms for their GSA contracts. The starting point is what is in the original pricing proposal, and strategic errors in the proposal can be an ongoing regret for the life of the contract. We recommend that firms clearly think through their

pricing strategy and their choice of proposing entity (see 5, above) before beginning any other part of their proposal.

**7. Persuade GSA that your firm is a “safe buy.”** You will not be awarded a GSA contract merely because you are a high-quality provider of products and services. You also must convince the reviewer that you are a “safe” buy—a firm that will adhere to the letter and spirit of the sometimes-arcane rules that apply when selling to the federal government. Your proposal’s descriptions of your management, accounting, and quality control systems give you an opportunity to prove to GSA that you understand, and will adhere to, the rules, and will not cause inadvertent problems or embarrassments for GSA or the agencies that eventually order services under the contract.

**8. Less is more.** Many GSA RFPs place tight page limits on each section of the technical proposal. If possible, try to be even more succinct. Writing reams of material is not a good strategy. You are not competing against other companies: GSA will award you a contract if your proposal is acceptable with respect to the RFP’s evaluation criteria. If you write a tome, you will jeopardize your proposal. Overachieve in another way: write sections that are persuasive and **brief**.

**9. Learn how GSA interprets FAR provisions.**

GSA is legally required to include in its RFPs many standard provisions from the 2000+ page Federal Acquisition Regulation (“FAR”). Many of these provisions appear to require offerors to perform detailed analyses as part of their proposals. In practice, GSA has discretion in interpreting these provisions. GSA often exercises its discretion in favor of reducing burden on offerors. Before investing in legal, financial, and statistical research responding to various FAR-based provisions, make sure you understand what GSA really wants; and plan for meeting these needs as cost-effectively as possible. GSA’s RFPs sometimes refer to standard FAR provisions but do not reprint the provisions in the RFP. Make sure that you look up and understand all provisions incorporated by reference.

**10. Buy the right kind of help.** For most GSA schedules, the preparation of the technical proposal can be straightforward. The administrative and pricing proposals can be the long poles in the tent. Many consultants offer a one-size-fits-all price of \$10,000 for the preparation of a GSA proposal. You may be better off paying for services on an hourly basis, for support tailored to your particular needs. This can result in proposals being submitted for a small fraction of this cost.

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