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Background Research and the “Blackout Period”

or

“Who You Gonna Call?”

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For everyone currently working on a DoD SBIR proposal for the upcoming deadline, or planning to develop a proposal for a future DoD SBIR/STTR topic:

One of the most important things to keep in mind when developing an SBIR proposal for the Department of Defense is that DoD is NOT a “**peer review**” agency. Peer review agencies such as NSF send your proposal out to be reviewed by (hopefully) unbiased subject matter experts in universities or elsewhere, who will rate your proposal solely on its scientific and technical merits and/or business potential. DoD is a “**line review**” agency, where the person(s) who wrote the topic (Topic Authors or Technical Points of Contact – TPOCs) will be the primary reviewer(s), and generally decide who gets funded or not. The TPOCs are effectively your customer, who will be buying your product - that is, funding your project to develop that product for their team. More importantly, if they select your proposal for funding, they will be judged by their superiors on your performance, so they want to take every step possible to ensure that you can do the job well and have their (the customer’s) interests foremost in your mind, and fully understand their needs.

You should also be aware that DoD is a contracting agency (not a granting agency), so their SBIR process is subject to Federal Acquisition Regulations (FARs). As a result, once the solicitation is officially “open for submissions” – the beginning of the so-called “Blackout Period” - you are prohibited from direct contact with the TPOCs “in the interests of fairness.” DoD has been very helpful to small firms by actually posting contact information for the individual Topic Authors and TPOCs, so that you can talk to them or email them prior to the Blackout. This is an opportunity every proposing firm should take advantage of, and can make all the difference between winning and losing in an increasingly tight competition.

To create a winning DoD SBIR proposal, it’s essential that you demonstrate to the DoD reviewers that you understand their needs and applications, and are familiar with whatever technologies they may already be using. While discussions with the TPOC can provide some of that information, you need to find out as much relevant information as you can before you contact them, so you can ask the right questions, without wasting their time or giving a poor first impression. You don’t want to come across in this initial discussion as totally naïve about the program or system being supported by this topic, its applications, or the military in general. Get started on that initial background research ASAP – as soon as you find a relevant topic, and preferably long before the Blackout Date looms near. See the “**Initial Search Strategies and Internet Resources**” later in this document.

After you’ve done that research and are ready to contact the TPOC, always keep in mind the perspective that you are trying to build a comfortable working relationship with your customer – the people in DoD who would be using your technology. You want to bring value and service to them, NOT try to “sell them something.” Keeping that perspective is difficult, but important, since as technologists and inventors, we tend to be really proud of our creations, and forget that others may not see it in the same light. After a confident but brief introduction, try to listen a lot more than you talk, and you may discover that their needs are something different than you initially expected, but that you would be able to meet with some minor changes to your concept.

While you never want to give the impression that you’re trying to “sell something” to the TPOCs in your phone call, you must consider that calling the TPOC, your potential Defense customer, really is a form of marketing. In marketing, as in other personal interactions, you make a much more favorable impression if



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you show interest in and pay attention to the person you're talking to, rather than talking a lot about yourself and all the great things you (or your technology) can do. As astute observers of human nature have observed, when you have a conversation with someone, and focus on showing considerable interest in what they have to say, drawing them out to say even more about their particular interests (in this case, the Defense program or system that the topic supports, and the needs it would solve), they'll be more impressed with you and think favorably of the discussion. Even if you end up saying little at all about yourself, they're more likely to come away thinking "What an obviously intelligent and informed person he/she is! I'll need to watch for their proposal!"

After you've gotten someone's attention in a positive manner like this, and they're reviewing your proposal, they're more likely to read it carefully, looking for the positive aspects – and reasons to fund it. If instead it's a proposal they receive "out of the blue," or if they had a memorable negative impression of you (e.g. "too pushy and kept trying to sell me on their wild idea, and never really seemed to get a firm grasp of what we actually need this for"), then they're more likely to skim your proposal looking for faults, and reasons NOT to fund it, which they're sure to find in almost any proposal!

You should also be aware of your attitude and the motivation behind your interest in a particular topic – these can have subtle effects on your discussion, but can be easily noticed by observant listeners. An analogy would be going to a bank loan officer seeking a business loan. Imagine if you went in with an attitude of "I really need the money! I don't really have a clear and defined business plan, but believe me, I know I'll be successful, and I'm good for the money!" That loan officer would immediately recognize that you're a high risk, and should not loan you the bank's money. Imagine instead a different approach: "We're doing quite well as a business, and everything's going great. Now we've uncovered this new opportunity with big growth potential, which fits quite nicely with our overall business direction and capabilities, and we'd like to be able to address it. Our plan shows that with \$150K in new capital over 24 months...."

Get the point? If you're just looking for government money, chasing after any opportunity you think you might be able to handle, regardless of whether it fits into your strategic long-term business objectives, that attitude will show itself in your discussions with the TPOC, and in your proposal, hurting your chances of winning. If instead you talk to the TPOC with the perspective and attitude of a successful company that wants to help their customer, and provide them with the best possible solution for their needs at a reasonable cost, then you'll have already put yourself well ahead of most of your competitors in the whole process.

Even if the DoD SBIR "Blackout Period" has begun, and you've (hopefully) spoken with the DoD SBIR Topic Authors or TPOCs to find out all the background information you could before the Blackout date, there are still plenty of options you can and should follow to gather critical information for your proposal. While you are developing your outline and work plan, and writing your first draft of your proposal, here are a few other things you might want to consider, to help increase your chances of winning.

A couple of key questions to keep in mind whenever talking to Defense personnel (and Defense Prime Contractors) are "Who do you know in the Defense Department that is using this technology (or would be if it were available)?" and "Who else in DoD is working on development of related technology?" If you can get some names and contact information, you may be able to find out some excellent background information, which could help you develop a much more "user-focused" and more effective proposal.

Even after entering the Blackout Period, during which "direct communication between proposers and topic authors is not allowed," that does not prohibit some other very effective and valuable communications:

- If you obtained names of other people to talk to from the TPOC, or from other sources (see below), there is (usually) no restriction on discussing technical issues with other DoD personnel during the Blackout Period. Even though they may not be covered by the restrictions, it's still a good idea just to talk about



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technology and applications, without bringing up the fact that you are working on an SBIR proposal (they may not be familiar with the rules, and/or might not be comfortable talking to you in the context of SBIR). In any case, always respect their wishes if they don't want to discuss anything (they might even be a topic author for a different SBIR topic currently out).

- If you are working with university researchers, they are usually not considered "proposers" or PI's in SBIR, and thus are seldom held to the same restriction as you might be. If your university research collaborator does call a TPOC, they should immediately identify themselves as university researchers. Similar caveats as above still hold for these discussions.

Initial Search Strategies and Internet Resources

Finding out who to talk to:

Here are a few ways to find more background information, and get contact information for DoD personnel and contractors who might be able to provide you with valuable insight:

- Past SBIR Topic Authors: Go to www.zyn.com/sbir and then click on "**Closed SBIR/STTR Solicitation Topics**" under "Search Services." Type in a few keywords, and look for past topics that appear relevant to your current proposal. Contact information for the Topic Author on DoD SBIR/STTR topics is usually included at this source.
- After you get some relevant past topics, go to the DoD SBIR/STTR web site (<http://www.acq.osd.mil/osbp/sbir/>) and click on "Awards" on the pull-down menu. Use the "Awards Search" to find who won for the topics you found earlier. The award data usually includes PI names and contact info. You might want to call these companies, and talk to them about their project, and/or ask the TPOC about the end results of awarded projects, especially if there was a Phase II completed (i.e., were they satisfied, or did a good technology come out of it).
- Find out about the military customers or end-users of the technology to be developed – the topic often notes what systems the technology is to be used for.
- Note the source of the topic, which is often noted at the beginning of the list of topics for that DoD Component – e.g. several topics may be listed under the [Armaments RD&E Center \(ARDEC\)](#) in the Army SBIR list of topics, and you can follow that link to learn more about that organization. If the organization is not listed, that can often be determined from the TPOC's e-mail address, if provided: wpafb.mil is Wright Patterson AFB; navair.navy.mil is Naval Air Systems Command, etc. You can then find out more about the organization by going to their website, which is often just a simple matter of adding "www" to the domain (e.g. www.navair.navy.mil).
- Standard Web searches can also help, especially for finding relevant DoD projects or research activities. One good method of searching, using Google, for example, is to put in several keywords and phrases, and restrict your search to ".mil" domain sites. If you don't get enough "hits" this way, just reduce the number of search terms, or change some, until you find what you're looking for. A typical search of this type might be: [spectrometer FTIR CBW "anthrax spores" site:mil]. The "**site:mil**" (or an even more restrictive "**site:army.mil**") is what limits the search to those specific domain names, instead of getting hits from thousands of commercial (.com), university (.edu) or foreign (e.g. .nl) websites.



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Getting copies of reference documents:

Many DoD SBIR topics cite key references or documents you should review. To get these, and other possibly valuable references, if a link is not provided, you should go to the DTIC information site:

The Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) provides background technical information services at no cost, which can assist SBIR/STTR participants in proposal preparation, product development, marketing and networking. The DTIC web site provides many **free services** at <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/>.

SITIS: Interactive question and answer forum for specific technical questions concerning DoD topics, changes, and topic reference information at <http://www.dodsbir.net/sitis/>. Be sure to check this site for your topic(s) regularly!

DoD Budget Materials and justifications: Assuming you're serious about becoming a Defense contractor, and plan to get involved in some specific program or technology area, it's important that you understand a bit about the planned Defense budgets for that program or technology area. The best place to start is with the President's Budget request for the Department of Defense, usually issued in February for the following Fiscal Year (FY2014 begins Oct. 1, 2013). You can download copies of these massive documents at <http://comptroller.defense.gov/budget2013.html>

The top-level documents provide a broad overview, but you should dig down to the individual DoD Components from here:

[US Army Budget Documentation](#)

[US Navy Budget Documentation](#)

[US Air Force Budget Documentation](#)

[Defense Wide Budget Documentation](#) (includes OSD, DARPA, MDA, SOCOM, DLA, etc.)

Within these Component sections, given that you are looking at new technology development, you should focus on the R&D documents, such as these for the Navy:

[Research & Development, Navy \(BA 1 - 3\)](#)

[Research & Development, Navy \(BA 4\)](#)

[Research & Development, Navy \(BA 5\)](#)

[Research & Development, Navy \(BA 6\)](#)

[Research & Development, Navy \(BA 7\)](#)

These PDF documents are searchable, so you can search for instances of specific keywords, program names, or Program Elements (PEs). Each PE will have detailed budget justifications, describing past activities, results, future plans, and past and future budget plans (which may change as a result of Congressional actions). Prime Contractors involved may sometimes be mentioned, but in any case, such detailed information and knowledge of future budgets can be invaluable when talking to a TPOC (who may not even have seen this information). See the example at the end of this document for the budget justification for PE 0604274N: Next Generation Jammer (NGJ)

While downloading the full R&D budget justifications for each of the four is preferable for thoroughness (so that you can be aware of other Services or Components working on similar technology applications), you can often find budget justifications for relevant programs just by including "RDT&E" with your search terms on a Google search (e.g. [SIGINT RDT&E] to search for program involving Signals Intelligence), although that may result in too many less relevant hits, especially from prior years.

Planning for Long-term Success

If you really want to succeed with DoD SBIR/STTR, then you are really making the commitment to become a Defense Contractor, rather than just a company winning money for technology development. To do so, you will need to make an extended effort to get to know your customers (Defense Program Managers and



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Prime Contractors) and build relationships with those customers through extensive business and personal contacts. Among the best ways to get started in doing that is through Defense trade shows and meetings, many sponsored by Defense industry associations, such as NDIA (National Defense Industry Association – www.ndia.org), which sponsors numerous focused Defense trade shows and conferences.

You should also look into specific DoD laboratories which may be working on related technology areas or applications – building a formal relationship with the right DoD laboratory can help you in your long-term technology development and business success. For example, a Cooperative R&D Agreement (CRADA) is an investment of your time, and cannot directly provide you with any money from the lab or agency, but the research resources you leverage, and the relationships you build, can result in major opportunities down the line. To find a DoD laboratory, or any federal agency laboratory in your area, or working on specific technology of interest, the Federal Laboratory Consortium (FLC) has a searchable database of federal labs at <http://www.federallabs.org/labs/>. You can learn about specific methods of collaborating with federal labs, including CRADAs, at <http://www.federallabs.org/education/t2-mechanisms/matrix-mechanism/>. Most federal labs have a Technology Transfer (T2) manager or specialist, often referred to as an ORTA (Office of Research and Technology Applications) who can help you in establishing any kind of collaboration with that lab (but not contracting – that would be handled typically by their Small Business Office).

Note: Current SBIR rules allow companies to fund a CRADA or other federal laboratory R&D using SBIR or STTR funding, subject to the percentage subcontracting limits, and guidance regarding perceived conflicts of interest as described in the current SBA SBIR and STTR Program Policy Directives (August 6, 2012). Some labs (especially DOE labs) are defined as FFRDCs (Federally Funded R&D Centers), if listed at <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/ffrdclist/>, the Master Government List of Federally Funded R&D Centers, and so can qualify as the Research Institution for an STTR.

If you are interested in collaborating with a DoD laboratory (leveraging unique R&D capabilities, while building strategic Defense organizational relationships), or if you are seeking technology available from a DoD laboratory for possible licensing and future commercial use, please contact TechLink for free assistance.