

EXORCIZE YOUR PROPOSAL DEMONS!

By Chuck Keller, the Proposal Exorcist; AF.APMP

The Sunken Sub Demon



It is common for Uncle Sam to award a Federal Government contract to a contractor team consisting of a prime contractor supported by subcontractors (known as subs), especially small business (SB) subs.

The Feds promote business for SB contractors by requiring primes to propose SB subcontracting goals for higher price tag contracts. For lower value contracts, Uncle Sam encourages work for SB business by setting aside contracts for award to SB contractors serving as primes.

The Sunken Sub Demon sinks the efforts of primes and SB subs to form proposal crews for sailing away to federal contract victory. This proposal demon especially likes to prey upon subs that have little or no marketing, contracting, or proposal experience/resources for finding and bidding on prospective federal contracts.

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Proposal Demons (Continued)

Reportedly, the Sunken Sub Demon appears as a pirate with a peg leg and a squawking parrot on his shoulder and swings a mean sword—the pirate not the parrot. (A shipmate of this pirate is responsible for sinking the boats of contractors seeking federal SB set-aside contracts. Combating this shipmate is not the subject of this nautical sermon.)

The following is Proposal Exorcist advice for dodging the torpedoes and depth charges (and sword) of the Sunken Sub Demon's arsenal. Although this sermon is directed to SB contractors seeking federal work as subs, it can provide seaworthy lessons for their federal contract prime partners—and prime-sub teams seeking commercial work.

- Learn how the federal acquisition and contracting processes work. Implement a marketing intelligence/capture management plan to identify federal bid opportunities, and join a proposal team as a sub preferably before the target RFP is released.
 - ▶ Study the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) to learn the rules for Federal Government procurement of products and services. The 53-part FAR can be accessed free of charge via www.arnet.gov. For FAR structure and topics, see www.acquisition.gov/far/farzipedframe.html.
 - ▶ To receive a federal contract, you must register with the Central Contractor Registration (CCR) database. Your registration allows the Federal Government and prime commercial contractors to access the database to find you as a potential sub. The CCR also provides links to procurement opportunities. For details about the CCR, see www.ccr.gov.
 - ▶ Obtain your applicable federal certification/representation as an SB, 8(a) (socially and economically disadvantaged) SB, HUBZone SB, veteran-owned SB, service-disabled veteran-owned SB, or women-owned SB.
 - ▶ Get help from Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs). The PTAC program, administered by the Federal Defense Logistics Agency, helps businesses to identify and bid on potential federal, state, and local government contract opportunities. Assistance is provided free or for a nominal cost. For PTAC services and locations, see www.dla.mil/db/procurem.htm.
- ▶ Use bid search commercial services—both free and fee-based services. For a list of bid search resources, see <http://proposalcafe.com/directory/weblinks/937-bid-finder-services>.
- ▶ Attend SB contractor conferences held by Federal/state government and industry sponsors. These conferences can provide valuable federal acquisition and contract training, and introduce you to potential government customers and commercial companies that might use you as a sub.
- ▶ Contact SB advocates/specialists, contracting officers, and product/service users at federal agencies/military commands to learn about contract opportunities, how best to pursue them, and to inform them about your product or service.
- ▶ Check out the many federal Websites that publicize contract opportunities, including possible subcontracts with prime contractors, such as FedBizOpps.gov (www.fbo.gov), SBA SUB-Net (<http://web.sba.gov/subnet/>), and Websites for individual federal agencies/military commands. Get on the distribution list for solicitation announcements from federal customers, including the release of Requests for Information, draft Requests for Proposal (RFP), and formal RFP documents. Study these documents to determine your fit as a sub with a prospective prime contractor.
- ▶ Market your company to prime contractors that you know use your type of product or service for federal work and actively seek SBs to help them meet federal subcontracting goals. If you know a prime contractor is planning to re-compete as the incumbent for a federal contract, see if there is a role your company could play as a sub on the re-compete proposal team.
- ▶ Attend pre- and post-RFP proposal meetings conducted by federal customers. Attendance can be a

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- good way to meet prime contractors seeking subs for their proposal teams.
- ▶ Sell your company to potential prime contractors not just on your ability to provide the needed product/service because there may be many SB contractors that can provide the same product/service. Offer strategic, tactical, or unique value you that you can bring to the proposal team, such as the following:
 - Quantity and quality of products/services and labor resources
 - Strong ownership/management leading a stable workforce with low employee turnover
 - Qualified, experienced, or customer-preferred key personnel
 - Competitive labor rates and material costs offered by a financially strong company
 - SB certifications/representations to help the prime meet SB participation goals
 - Experience working with the prime and other team subs
 - Proven past performance providing relevant products/services for the targeted customer
 - Proven past performance providing relevant products/services to other Federal customers
 - Geographic proximity to the prime, other team subs, and the customer
 - Available labor and material resources to support the proposal, including staff (subject matter experts, writers, illustrators, editors, pricers, schedulers, and proposal managers/coordinators) with federal proposal and contracting experience
 - Marketing intelligence about the competition, customer, and product/service industry.
 - Understand your role on the proposal and proposed contract, and commit to providing the required resources to successfully support both. Prepare to be a strong and contributing member of the proposal team.
 - ▶ Implement a non-disclosure agreement to safeguard proprietary data (your's and the prime's) and a prime-sub agreement to summarize your proposal and proposed contract roles.
 - ▶ Help the prime develop a detailed statement of work to specify your role in the proposed contract, thus preparing the proposal team to write about your contract work and to price this work.
 - ▶ Check with the RFP, and the prime contractor, to determine if you can be a sub on more than one proposal team. Decide if you will play the field or make an exclusive agreement to support one prime. If you decide to be on more than one team, be up front with all the primes by telling them of your decision.
 - ▶ Analyze the RFP to understand the proposal and contract requirements, including any contractual requirements that may flow down from the prime to you as a sub or any requirement that would force you to give the federal customer rights to your proprietary data or intellectual property.
 - ▶ Learn about and commit support for the prime's proposal management and development process. Large primes that produce many proposals for federal work can have established proposal development procedures directed by a dedicated and professional proposal organization. Know how to support the prime's proposal process and organization.
 - ▶ Designate a lead proposal manager to represent your company with the prime giving this person the authority to provide needed proposal resources and to resolve any proposal issues that arise among your staff, the prime and other proposal team subs. Consider having a project lead to assist your proposal manager to direct your input of technical, management, past performance, and pricing information to the prime.
 - ▶ Help the prime develop the proposal development schedule and commit to meeting that schedule, including an understanding of when the prime will expect your proposal staff to work at the facility of the prime or another sub.

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Proposal Demons (Continued)

- Actively support the prime with the development of proposal strategy and content. Do not wait to be told what to do. Take the initiative to do what needs doing, and offer help to the prime for proposal development within, of course, the constraints of your bid and proposal budget and the availability/skills of your proposal resources.
 - ▶ Participate in proposal strategy meetings.
 - ▶ Attend the proposal kickoff meeting to discuss proposal assignments and deadlines, not starting any assigned tasks unless you completely understand them, and their associated RFP and prime requirements.
 - ▶ Meet your proposal task deadlines. A prime can be challenged managing the proposal inputs of a multi-sub team and can find it difficult enough getting its own staff to meet proposal deadlines. Do not add to the prime's proposal management workload by missing deadlines.
 - ▶ Work with the prime to identify your past performance contracts to be cited in the proposal. Take action to send past performance surveys/questionsnaires to your past performance clients for completion and forwarding to the prospective customer by the deadline.
 - ▶ Start the pricing process early, realizing that pricing is a time-consuming process and often one of the last proposal tasks finished before the proposal is submitted.
 - ▶ Submit to the prime your comments/questions about the RFP for possible forwarding to the customer.
 - ▶ Attend the customer's post-RFP proposal conference if desired by the prime.
 - ▶ Help develop the proposal's management and sub management plan, ensuring that the proposal explains prime and sub roles and the rationale for the prime-sub approach and management structure.
 - ▶ Offer to contribute objective reviewers for proposal reviews with staff not directly involved in the development of the proposal.
- ▶ Read customer responses to RFP comments and questions submitted by prospective bidders. Also read and understand the impact of all RFP amendments issued by the customer. Do not consider these tasks to be just the responsibility of the prime.
- Actively support the prime after the proposal is submitted, realizing what is done after the proposal is sent and after contract award can greatly affect your chance of winning the subject contract or future federal contracts.
 - ▶ Support the responses to customer questions or deficiency/clarification notices, and help revise the proposal as required
 - ▶ Support the oral presentation to the customer as required
 - ▶ Support on-site visits by or demonstrations for the customer as required
 - ▶ Get a proposal debrief (with the prime) from the customer win or lose
 - ▶ Conduct a lessons learned analysis about the proposal effort with the prime and within your own company
 - ▶ If you win the subcontract, perform well!

I hope this advice will keep the Sunken Sub Demon off your proposal vessel and that your crew will safely navigate what can be the rough seas of federal procurement. If you can successfully find and perform federal work as a sub, the experience you gain may lead you to win more federal work either as a sub or prime. By the way, watch where you step around the parrot.

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The Proposal Exorcist recognizes Mitch Reed, an APMP colleague and independent proposal consultant, as a contributor to this sermon and recommends the following articles for more advice about subcontracting, teaming, and winning Federal work.

- “How to Vet Potential Teammates to Prevent Teaming Pitfalls” by Olessia Somotrova-Taylor, (www.ostglobalsolutions.com/resources/articles/100901_Vetting-Teammates.htm)
- Articles by Onvia (www.onvia.com/resourcecenter/fp/subcontracting.aspx)
 - ▶ “Subcontracting Agreement: A Vital Part of Government Subcontracting”
 - ▶ “Statement of Work, Delivery Schedule & Invoicing Schedule”
 - ▶ “Teaming Agreement: the Role of the Prime Contractor”
 - ▶ “Pricing Out your Subcontract Work”
 - ▶ “Why Subcontractors Should Investigate Winning Government Proposals”
- Articles by Carl Dickson, CapturePlanning.com
 - ▶ “An introduction to teaming” (www.captureplanning.com/articles/26471.cfm)
 - ▶ “Breaking into the government marketplace by subcontracting” (www.captureplanning.com/articles/11443.cfm)
- “GUIDE TO DoD CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES: 'A Step-by-Step Approach to the DoD Marketplace'” by the Department of Defense Office of Small Business Programs (www.acq.osd.mil/osbp/doing_business/DoD_Contracting_Guide.htm)
- “Opening Doors: small business opportunities in federal government contracting” by the U.S. Small Business Administration (www.sba.gov/idc/groups/public/documents/sba_homepage/serv_pub_contracting.pdf)