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Tell federal customers what you can do for them

Washington Business Journal - by Joyce Bosc

Who is your company, and what makes it different from your competitors?

Can you answer that question without hesitation? More importantly, can your government customers answer it too?

It's no secret that most government agencies are risk averse. That's a good thing. It means that when they have made a decision to purchase your products or services, they feel secure that they are working with a solid, reputable and reliable organization.

Yet many companies face a common obstacle when approaching government business: They do not have a good way to convey their past performance and expertise. So there's the question. What's the answer?

The solution is to create a government-specific corporate capabilities package and keep it fresh.

Now, I know this can seem like a daunting task. Your marketing department is probably short on time and even shorter on resources. But with just a little bit of effort, you can put together a comprehensive kit to present to business prospects, the media and strategic partners. You can also use it as a leave-behind at meetings or as an offer for direct mail or e-mail campaigns.

In addition to its many uses and audiences, a corporate capabilities statement says important things about your company. I like to call them "The Four Cs":

- You are credible.
- Your clients are happy.
- You are committed to the success of the business.
- You are competitive in your industry.

The typical package may include a letter from the CEO, a list of services, your codes under the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) a fact sheet, brochure, staff bios, client list, case studies, client reference letters, press releases and press coverage.

All those pieces will go a long way toward establishing credibility with prospective federal customers.

Begin by organizing your internal resources. Set up a job number and assign a team member to the act as the hub.

Take an inventory of your existing materials. Look at proposals, sales presentations and previous customer correspondence. How does your company describe itself in those materials?

With that as your starting point, you're halfway to creating your capabilities package. What past successes do you usually reference in new business-to-government pitches? Use that information to develop your case studies. Focus on the services that would be of use to the government.

And there's always good old competitive intelligence. Collect samples from your top competitors. How do they present themselves?

Your company fact sheet is a compilation of your organization's "vitals." It presents fast facts in an easy-to-read format so potential customers do not have hunt all over your Web site for them. I suggest including information like date founded, number of employees, office locations, key products and services, areas of expertise, contract vehicles, leadership team, memberships and certifications, and points of contact. (That wasn't so bad, was it?)

Your first case studies will come from past proposals or the sales materials you are already using. Once you have written new case studies, you can start using those for your sales materials too -- another reason for marketing and business development departments to love each other.

A typical case study should be 300 to 650 words and written like a white paper (nothing too sales-y allowed). Be sure to include the customer's name, the challenge that had to be faced, the solution your organization provided and the results, preferably with quantitative metrics. If you have a quote from your customer, include that too. If you don't, why not ask for one?

The "just ask for it" principle also applies to reference letters. It's a simple concept, but most people don't do it, even though these third-party validations are one of the easiest ways to show your aptitude and inspire confidence in your customers. The key is to just ask your customer for it -- in a way that is appropriate and convenient for them.

Of course, timing is everything. Don't ask for a reference your second week on the job. Wait until after a milestone (maybe you've just hit the three- or six-month mark in your contract) or big success (you've just supported the customer's 1,000th desktop application).

Then offer to write the letter for your customer. This will take the burden off the customer, give you an opportunity to tie in your own company messaging, and allow you to highlight the accomplishments that you know will resonate best with prospective customers.

Lastly, thank your customer profusely!

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