

How to do business with government

Written by William Reed

Wednesday, 30 September 2009 15:07

“Never before has the partnership between public and private industry been so critical...we should never lose focus on what is happening in front of our own eyes,” are words of wisdom from a man who has made his mark marketing millions of dollars in contracts for minority enterprises. Government marketing expert Michael Bowlds’ comment at a Congressional Black Caucus event in Washington, DC put elected and procurement officials and prime contractors in the spotlight for roles they play in the ½ trillion dollar government procurement process.

Government Contracts are an excellent source of business for minorities’ enterprises. Whatever you sell, chances are Uncle Sam will buy it. Federal, state and local governments purchase goods and services ranging from paper clips to computer equipment and trash hauling. Dealing with the government can be lucrative, but thousands of contracts, worth billions, bypass minorities and each year because they do not know of or understand governments’ procurement processes.

Bowlds specializes in selling to Uncle Sam. His Company sets an example for minorities’ procurements - Mountaintop Marketing garnered \$200 million in contract awards for clients last year. He says marketing “is absolutely critical” to ward making minority companies and their capabilities known to government buyers. The 2009 Minority Business Awards Bowlds hosted during the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Annual Legislative Week was symbolic of opportunities and resources minorities need for government procurements. The Salute to Minority Women in Business showcased major players in government sector purchasing and high-level executives from the US Agencies for Minority Business Development (MBDA), International Development (USAID) and Small Business (SBA).

Amid all the political issues Blacks engage in during Caucus Week, the Minority Business event has emerged as the primary program in integration and networking among Black elected-officials, government procurement officials and minority operators. The event lauds individuals “who lend time, talent, and resources to positively influence the lives of others”. Congresswoman Yvette D. Clarke’s keynote address emphasized that as a member of the House Committee on Small Business she “is constantly examining ways that Congress can address the needs of small businesses” and that she “will fight to ensure small businesses get their fair share of federal contracts, gain access to the most innovative technologies, and given the development assistance they need”. Government agencies have an obligation to meet specific diversity goals for contracting.

Note should also be paid to the role prime contractors play in government contracting. The Salute to Minority Women’s Executive Leadership Award went to Joan Robinson-Berry, Boeing Company Director, Strategic Work Placement & Small Business Liaison Officer. Ms. Robinson-Berry represents the enormity of opportunities minorities have with prime contractors. Boeing is a \$70 billion a year major aerospace and defense corporation. The Seattle-based company is the world’s largest aircraft manufacturer and the second largest aerospace and defense contractor. Ms. Robinson-Berry is responsible for integrating a \$5 billion Small Business Program for Boeing.

Opportunities are right “in front of your eyes” with a click. Government agencies use the Internet to let contractors know what they need. This puts pressure on small businesses to get

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electronically linked to the procurement world. Every government agency lists its procurement needs on its Web site. At the federal level, there are contract set asides for certified companies. At the state level, where the bulk of U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) funding for roadway and transportation infrastructure projects is allocated, each state and local transit agency must establish a goal for the participation of Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBE). Many states, counties, and cities also have programs that may have set asides, bid preferences or focused outreach.

Whatever type government contract you decide to pursue be sure to take advantage of the many resources at your disposal, such as the SBA, Department of Defense and General Services Administration. Private sector groups, such as the National Business League (NBL) offer repositories for minorities. Bowlds echoes NBL founder Booker T. Washington: "As with anything, the more you do it, the better you get". But, once you learn how to use [the system] well, the more lucrative it gets.

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