



Contract
Finder
Pro

The **CFP** guide to winning business with the UK Government

ISSUE1



Introduction

There are a lot of myths about winning business with the UK public sector. There is a grain of truth in most, but ultimately, it is a market like any other, with pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses. And, importantly, there are strategies that work and strategies that don't.

Let's take a look at the positives first. It is a big market and contract sizes can be large. It has clear rules of behaviour, although, it must be said, that these are not always followed as they should be.

While it is competitive, once you get in you can develop a substantial long term business. Twenty or 30-year revenue streams are not uncommon and should absolutely be the aim for anyone selling to the public sector. However, like everything in life, it isn't quite that easy. To really succeed in the Government market you need to invest to get the returns. A long term reward is rooted in a long term commitment.

So, how should you go about turning aspiration into reality? At Contract Finder Pro we've used our years of experience in the market and spoken to a wide range of successful salespeople to produce this step by step guide. It lays out the key steps you need to succeed, of course, if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask us.

Research into the areas you want to work in is essential.

Step 1

Research your market

The market is huge. It contains an abundance of sectors and sub-markets that all work differently. The NHS, for example, is very different to Defence and NHS England might behave differently to NHS Scotland.

This means that research into the areas you want to work in is essential. Who are the buyers? What services are they currently buying? What are the trends? Which suppliers are currently winning? Answering such questions before entering the market is a pre-requisite.

You also need to take a step back and consider the wider context. Check the political backdrop – is it stable or enduring some policy turbulence? Is funding rising for this department or are the aftershocks of austerity still lingering? Are the department’s policymakers committed to using local suppliers and how are their efforts to embrace digital technology progressing? Again, answering these queries is vital before deciding to take the plunge into the market.

Then there’s the more technical side of any procurement. Check the commercial terms as these can sometimes be difficult to comply with so make sure they will be palatable to your business. So, how are services being bought? Does the department rely on frameworks or is focused on open competition or catalogues like G-Cloud? The frameworks themselves are worth investigating and understanding, helping you work out how to bring your products to market.

And obviously, you will not be the only supplier looking to this market. You need to know who your competitors will be. Looking at previous Award publications you can find out who has won things before and then work out what your offerings are needed to be to beat them.

The good news is that all the information you need is available. Although it can take a while to look, spending time here saves wasting time later – there is no point bringing a service to a customer who can’t then buy it for political reasons! Contract Finder Pro can help you with this research, we have lots of key market data you can analyse.

**Choose and commit
to a strategy you
believe in.**

Step 2

Pick your strategy

Once you understand the market for the products or services you provide, the next step is to pick your focus. In other words, you need to identify which sub-markets, geographies or types of customers you are targeting – from the NHS to the Royal Navy, the devolved administration in Wales to local councils in East Anglia - and how you are going to target them.

At the same time, you need to be sure why you believe you can win in these markets – be realistic with yourself. Can we offer a better or cheaper service, can we meet the customer's needs and can we offer evidence that we can? Remember, procurements need to show value, but also demonstrate that their choices aren't risky – for example, the last thing you want is for your customer to find itself criticised by the National Audit Office or a parliamentary selectcommittee.

Then you need to consider if your organisation will be the prime or a subcontractor. Not all suppliers should try and be the prime contractor as sometimes it can be much more lucrative to be in the team of a larger business. Prime contractors shoulder most of the risk and carry the lion's share of bid writing costs. Knowing your market and picking the firms to support or to support you can raise your chances of winning and lower your costs.

And above all, make sure your offering is realistic. In some crowded markets, saying, "we're the best" is hard for customers to believe and harder to prove. Once you've chosen your strategy you'll need to stick to it - things in the Public sector take time to work.

A well informed
engaged supplier
knows what their
customer needs.

Step 3

Invest in your target customers

This step is crucial. Blind bids can sometimes win but this is largely a function of chance – which cannot be a strategy! However, a well informed and engaged supplier who knows what their customer needs stands a much better chance of success.

This demands the early identification of the organisations you want to sell to. Doing this involves attending their industry days, their open days and forums. Add to this knowledge by studying their annual reports and websites; learning about their services and their plans, and discovering what they bought last year.

By tracking previous tender awards you can estimate when new competitions are likely to be held and make sure you're engaged well before those competitions come out.

Customer relationships are vital. Marking is always 'officially' fair, but people often score the bids of people they know a bit better. It's human nature – if things are ambiguous you're more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to something you know is good.

This process of investment could take years and we shouldn't be afraid of that commitment – it will pay dividends when the tenders come in. If you are talking to customers before they write their tenders you might also be able to influence what they ask for. For example, if you show them the new technology you have that they can buy they might just state that as a requirement in the tender. Most frustrated bidders just don't put the time in.

Procurement rules seek a minimum of three bidders to show that a competition was genuinely fair and open (this is in order to reduce the chance of the result being challenged). They will help all suppliers to ensure that they get three bidders because fewer could cause a competition to be challenged and re-run. If a tender is coming out then feel free to contact them directly and ask for information on what they want to see – they will help to a point.

Prepare any material you can in advance of that vital bid!

Step 4

Prepare your bid and compliance material

So, you know the market, you know the target customer and types of work, but there is one more crucial step. It is also one of the most overlooked and most common reasons why bids don't score well - the bid quality itself. It is surprisingly how often suppliers submit poor bids.

Government bids require a substantial amount of compliance material, varying from ISO certification to bank information, financial statements showing the supplier is a going concern to lots of credentials from previous customers to show this is a good choice.

Much of this material is predictable and can be prepared in advance, as can sorting out a quality template to use for a bid writing. Do not leave this to be the last minute, take the necessary time to get it ready in advance so you have it when you need it. Bids are stressful enough, you want to leave as much time for the solution and offer as possible, and not be distracted by admin! And if the admin is wrong the bid won't be compliant.

There is an art to writing a good bid, the key being clear English and a clear focus on what the customer is asking for - the market scheme will be clear and there is no point writing lots of information on services the customer hasn't asked about. There are specialist bid writing organisations that can help with both the bid writing and preparing the background material - for SMEs this can be an essential way to get parity with larger firms which can employ teams of bid authors and specialists.

Follow the CFP steps
and we're confident
you will succeed!

Step 5

Choose the right tender for you and bid to win

Right, this is the final hurdle. You know which customers you want to target, you know your capabilities and the type of work you want to bid for, and your templates and credentials are ready. All you need now is the tender.

Firstly – patience, this is a marathon, not a sprint. As salespeople we're always in a hurry, we want results yesterday and sometimes this can make us blind to the truth: if a tender is the wrong one, don't bid.

When bids come out, review them dispassionately. Take time to consider the mark scheme – is this about price? Can we answer these questions better than potential competitors? Be honest about your chances. As a rule of thumb, someone will find a way to score more than 85 per cent and if you can't see how to do that then this might well be a no-bid.

Remember that the UK Public sector has thousands of tenders in every category every year and the key is winning bids, not writing them. We recommend waiting for the right one and then throwing everything at it to win. Apply tunnel vision, think price, offering, formatting, pictures – everything you can to get extra points.

The only exception is if you want to practice, you could pick a 50/50 bid to test all your processes, make sure everyone knows what to do and seek feedback if you lose for learning purposes. Bids are expensive so don't try this more than once or twice, not least for the morale of the team in question.

If you follow all the steps above we're confident you will succeed!

Please contact us if you'd like to discuss any part of this and see how we can help you.

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