Plan to Win:

The 4 Pillar Approach to Success in the Federal Market

Executive Summary

"Fail to plan; plan to fail."

This well-used business axiom got that way for a reason. Success is not a matter of luck, and the federal marketplace is no exception. Companies consistently win government contracts because they understand what they're selling, who needs it, and how to get the word out to the people who do the buying.

The federal acquisition process can be lengthy. It often takes more than a year to win a contract. To put together a successful bid, a company must make fundamental business decisions right from the start:

- Commit the time, resources, and effort necessary to win.
- Follow through with discipline and resolve.

This applies to every firm— from large companies with government contract experience looking to expand their market footprint to small businesses seeking to break into the federal marketplace.

The staff at Alaris Advisers, LLC have a combined 100+ years of successful federal contracting experience. Alaris knows what it takes to help clients compete, win, and sustain growth in the government marketplace. They have distilled the knowledge and expertise that benefits their clients every day into the Four Pillars for federal market success: **strategic planning, capture management, bid and proposal support, and federal market intelligence.** These pillars are mutually supporting elements that together comprise a comprehensive approach to winning federal work.

Part 1 of this white paper lays out the Four Pillars and describes how they guide a company's activity in the government marketplace. Part 2 offers tips on how to choose wisely when hiring outside consultants to help tackle the federal marketplace.

The Four Pillars in Brief

When a company sets its sights on the federal market, these interrelated elements are crucial to success:
**Pillar 1: Strategic Planning** – A company's first step is to build a "qualified opportunity pipeline." This means the firm identifies its products and services, determines the market sector and agencies it will target, defines its value proposition, and establishes measurable goals and objectives for selling to the government.

**Pillar 2: Capture Planning and Management** – In this stage, a company commits to capturing its share of the federal market and plans how to do so. The firm's leadership decides to invest the time, resources, and people necessary to develop target opportunities. Staff plans activities and events, creates schedules, builds bid teams, and sets up tracking and reporting systems to discipline the work. Above all, the company develops customer intimacy with potential client agencies and learns about their requirements.

**Pillar 3: Bid and Proposal** – During this stage, a company organizes its effort to reap the benefits of the capture plan. The team initiates early communication with the target federal agency's proposal team. The information gleaned from this effort helps the company set timelines and standards; develop proposal templates and supporting materials; and manage the proposal development, writing, and publication. Collaborative virtual and/or physical workspaces help the bid team focus its efforts.

**Pillar 4: Market Intelligence** – This pillar encompasses a company's ongoing efforts to gather market intelligence, both during and in between bid efforts. Continuous monitoring means a firm is poised to anticipate and meet the requirements of the first three pillars. Market intelligence allows a company to build a sustained business rhythm for informed decisions about whether to pursue and bid on federal work.

**How to Hire Consulting Help**

Each company’s resources and needs are different. Small businesses often cite resource constraints as their biggest federal market challenge. At the other end of the spectrum, major corporations must manage the dynamics of a large organization. The services of an outside consultant must integrate smoothly with the organization's internal operations to generate a successful bid.

Part 2 on page 5 provides advice to companies of all sizes on how to benefit from outside support that is tailored to their needs.

**Part 1: The Four Pillars for Federal Market Success**

The Four Pillars—strategic planning, capture management, bid and proposal support, and federal market intelligence—present the best practices at every stage of the bidding process.
Pillar 1: Strategic Planning

The strategic planning pillar is the necessary and indispensable first step of any successful federal market approach. This applies to large companies with existing federal contacts as well as small businesses that seek initial entry into the market. Strategic planning encompasses the following steps:

- Identify products or services relative to the federal market. Isolate the government agencies and functional areas that would benefit from these offerings.
- Develop an overall value proposition associated with these products and services. How will customers benefit from a company's offerings?
- Compose a statement of purpose to guide proposal and bid development.
- Create goals (expected outcomes) and their respective enabling objectives (observable actions that can be evaluated for how well they contribute to reaching the goal). This helps allow a company to recognize when it needs to make adjustments to its products and/or services, business processes, budgets and resource allocations, and organizational structure. It is essential to remain flexible and adaptable over time for a federal market effort to result in a successful proposal to the government.

Careful strategic planning culminates in the development of a qualified opportunity pipeline—the prospects most likely to purchase a company's goods and/or services. A firm's approach to priming contracts, partnering, marketing, market intelligence, event participation, and networking all flow from initial strategic planning efforts.

Pillar 1 is an on-going process throughout the life of a firm's federal market presence. A strategic plan is a living document subject to deliberate adjustments as new circumstances dictate. It should be renewed at least once a year.

Pillar 2: Capture Management

The capture management pillar marks the beginning of company plans for specific activities that position it to win pipeline opportunities. It is also the point at which routine relationships develop among the capture, proposal, and project managers and their staffs. It is imperative that a company's federal team members make themselves known and become a routine presence in the market circles where they seek to sell:

- Capture management ideally creates a two-way flow of information between a firm and its potential federal customers. The company team acquires intimate knowledge of the targeted federal agencies' acquisition and program management staffs and requirements. The firm also seeks to influence the development of those requirements by ensuring that its capabilities are fully understood by agency staff.
These two-way relationships allow the proposal team to identify customer issues and interests. This information allows a company to customize its value proposition specific to each opportunity. The team can develop and market the best technical solution to solve the customer’s problem.

Aggressively responding to government Requests for Information (RFI) or Sources Sought (SS) are two important ways to make company capabilities known to potential federal customers.

- The capture pillar also includes strengthened teambuilding both within the company and with outside partners. Relationships based on trust and confidence take time to build. The payoff is more effective teamwork during the time-constrained crucible of proposal writing.

Whether forging new relationships or renewing old partnerships, a company should focus on partners with complementary core competencies. This approach to cultivating a bid team of subcontractors is an essential component of a capture plan. Many firms, both large and small, seek support from an outside consultant to assist with this matchmaking process.

Each opportunity cultivated during the capture phase will likely require adjustments in resources, time, and effort in the form of updates to the strategic plan. Firms often bring in a consultant to help develop a list of key networking opportunities, including one-on-one visits to customer representatives and informational settings such as government-sponsored industry days.

A company should emerge from the capture phase with value proposition honed, proposal team built, and resources and organizational effort defined.

**Pillar 3: Bid and Proposal**

*The bid and proposal pillar produces a compelling, compliant response to a government solicitation. This phase requires the most intense effort and organizational commitment.*

All team members—including partners; subcontractors; vendors; and especially capture, proposal, and project leaders—must focus to produce a compliant and compelling quality proposal. This document will determine whether the company wins the government agency contract.

Pillar 3 involves the greatest concentration of work within a short timeframe. Firms often seek a consultant's support to line up the necessary proposal writing functions—proposal manager, proposal coordinator, editor, illustrator, writers, and subject matter experts.
A company should plot out progressive activities for every day between the agency solicitation and the proposal submission date. This plan should cover a wide variety of mutually supportive activities:

- Draft and final RFP review and assessment
- Bid/no bid decision
- Compliance guidance
- Value proposition, win themes
- Competitive assessment
- Proposal calendar and schedule of activities
- Proposal templates and branding
- Writers’ guidance
- Proposal team communications (team, government, other stakeholders)
- Pricing assessment
- Reviews
- Proposal publication and submission

**Pillar 4: Market Intelligence**

The market intelligence pillar encompasses a consistent, ongoing effort to exploit reliable sources to understand the market and customer activities throughout the acquisition cycle.

A critical element of market intelligence is gaining insight on future agency requirements. This information gives a company the greatest amount of time to design and market solutions that meet government customers' future needs. It requires constant updates and focused information relevant to a firm's target markets. Government acquisition time lines are often extensive and require consistent monitoring to avoid missing significant information. A firm must focus on relevant market activities from early capture all the way through to contract award.

**Part 2: How to Hire Help--Vetting an Outside Consultant**

A successful federal contract bid is often a long, complex process. Many companies do not maintain a full range of in-house business development, capture, bid and proposal, and market intelligence resources. Winning in the federal market however requires excellence in these functions.

An experienced consultant with proven federal market success can actually save a business time and money while enabling a winning bid. This is true only if the consultant:

- Fully complements a company's capabilities.
- Augments only to the degree necessary to accomplish tasks.
- Minimizes disruption to the company's team and existing processes.
Below are important advantages to hiring a consultant and some advice on finding the right fit:

**Get a fresh outside perspective.**

Over time, teams built exclusively from in-house members tend to develop an advocacy frame of mind. This tendency may skew internal assessments of opportunities or solutions and makes them seem more achievable or potentially successful than they are in the eyes of intended customers. In the extended business cycle of the federal government, companies waste countless hours, resources, and dollars pursuing opportunities with little real prospect of success.

An outside consultant can help avoid this outcome. The consultant must offer forthright advice and honest assessments and not simply reflect the views of vested interests within the company. This helps to keep a company focused only where the prospects of success are most genuine.

**Include the consultant as an integral part of the core team comprised of the capture manager, proposal manager, and project manager.**

These essential managers oversee the crucial functions of intimate customer knowledge and proposal development and execution. Each of them should have full understanding of the details of the proposed bid. A collaboration that also includes the consultant--from opportunity identification through proposal execution--is optimal to winning bids and leveraging those wins to create new business.

**Hire a consultant that understands and fits within company work cycles.**

Companies must focus on the federal market to win government contracts. At the same time, firms also have competing daily commitments to other clients, customers, and stakeholders that demand time and attention. The best consultants accommodate--rather than disrupt--those on-going work commitments. The consultant schedules participation in advance. Each engagement is a high-impact, carefully focused interaction that minimizes the time investment even as it fully meets all agreed-upon goals and objectives.

**Recognize committed company leadership as a prerequisite for federal market success.**

An experienced consultant can provide expert assistance to reach federal sales goals. But company leaders must head up that effort. Leadership is the most essential aspect of a successful federal market penetration or expansion. Company leaders must remain fully committed over an extended business cycle. They must drive a disciplined and well-organized campaign to realize goals and
objectives. Strong leadership inspires active participation by all team members to win contracts and grow business.

**Conclusion**

Federal contracting is a competitive game. Leaders must ensure early and continuous coordination among capture, proposal, and program managers to position a company to its best advantage. This fosters customer intimacy and a detailed understanding of federal market opportunities. Armed with this knowledge, a company can submit a compelling proposal based on its strengths and execute the contract to the customer’s satisfaction.

Winning in the federal market is the result of knowledge, discipline, commitment, and leadership. Alaris Advisers are proven federal market experts who stand ready to apply the Four Pillar approach, build on your winning attributes and help your team capture more government work.