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Contractors Reveal Their Secrets

Women who've won the race for federal contracts tell how they did it.

By: Eve Gumpel | 03/23/2009

URL: <http://www.womenentrepreneur.com/2009/03/contractors-reveal-their-secrets.html>

Applying for government contracts is a complex, confusing and often intimidating process. Perhaps that's why the government routinely fails to meet its mandated goal of awarding 5 percent of its contracts to women business owners.

[Women Impacting Public Policy](#) and [American Express OPEN](#) are striving to change that pattern by creating the Give Me 5 program, which aims to provide women with the information and the tools they need to create successful contracting bids.

WIPP also helped WomenEntrepreneur.com compile the following advice from nine women business owners in various industries who've secured contracts from federal agencies or are striving to do so. The women discuss the obstacles, their experiences--both good and bad-- and their secrets of success to help other women striving to follow in their footsteps.

Name: **Tina Baker**

Name of Business: [Cadence Group](#)

Location: Atlanta

Description of business: Information management service provider

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Why? We have been a prime federal contractor since 1992. We began subcontracting a few years ago in an attempt to expand our federal sector business.

How did you prepare for the opportunity? We built relationships with technical contacts, small business contacts, and partners and employees/subs with pre-existing relationships and client experience.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? About six months.

What was the first contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? It was a services contract in a practice area new to our company (library services vs. IT services), for about \$5 million. We thought we had a good chance because we had a (new) owner with client experience.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract? The toughest thing in getting the first contract was meeting the government requirements for accounting, reporting and employee benefits, and determining how to appropriately price the contract. We formed a subsidiary to focus on federal contracts and meet these requirements.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you? Our team's experience, our willingness to negotiate a competitive price, our corporate financial stability and our references.

As you've received subsequent contracts, have they all been similar, have they grown in size or are they in various different areas? We grew the first contract (competed for it multiple times) to \$12 million in the years 1992 to 2005 [by expanding] our practice areas. We obtained a GSA schedule and have won multiple smaller contracts since then, but we have not been able to win another large contract. Thus, we began to look at subcontracting.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract? Get registered. Begin building relationships with individuals and companies that have experience with your targeted clients. Prepare your accounting system. Do your homework and be prepared to respond to a federal RFP. When an opportunity arises, act.

Name: Lynn Sutton

Name of Business: Kairos Consulting Worldwide LLC

Location: Chicago

Description of business: Management consulting firm specializing in process management and organizational development

Relationship with Give Me 5: National partner with WIPP and member of WIPP's Procurement Committee

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Why? We are the prime contractor on our current contract with the Department of Defense. The contract was awarded as an 8(a) sole source. [A certified 8(a) firm is owned and operated by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and eligible to receive federal contracts under the Small Business Administration's 8(a) Business Development Program. 8(a) contractors can procure sole-source contracts.]

How did you prepare for the opportunity? We were 8(a) certified, which positioned us to be ready for opportunities like this. And for this specific opportunity, we pulled together a team that was knowledgeable and experienced in the specific areas covered. We also pulled in a subcontractor with significant experience in this area.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? One year

What was the contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? One-year contract for \$1.26 million. We were contracted to provide project management and change management services for the Navy as it transitioned several functions to another government agency. We had the right skill set and the right team members to really add value to the effort. We saw the opportunity to perform beyond the agency's expectations. We are supporting the Navy as it transitions people, roles and systems as part of a larger effort to streamline its costs and optimize operations.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract? The toughest challenge was the fact that we did not have past performance with a government contract. That made us an unknown in the government world.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you? We had the right team members (experienced and respected in the project regions), and they were ready to hit the ground running.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract? Start by partnering with another firm, going in as a subcontractor. Be prepared for the opportunities by being certified and/or obtaining a General Services Administration Schedule [a list of companies from which federal agencies can order goods and

services] or some other government vehicle. This allows the government agencies to engage you.

Name: Jennifer Bisceglie

Name of Business: InTEROS Solutions Inc.

Location: McLean, Va.

Description of business: Strategic and operational supply chain management, woman-owned consultancy.

Relationship with Give Me 5: WIPP board member and Give Me 5 mentor for women entrepreneurs aspiring to pursue opportunities with the federal government.

I attribute our company's success in part to the factors that WIPP and Give Me 5 are stressing as a strong foundation for women government contractors. I view my relationship with Give Me 5 as an extension of this critical work as well as a vehicle to continue to learn, network and give back.

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Why? Currently, InTEROS is a subcontractor on all of our contracts. Working through large systems integrators has enabled us to learn from valuable industry mentors and to build our infrastructure in a deliberate and effective fashion. We believe this paced growth will enable us to remain competitive for years to come.

How did you prepare for the opportunity?

No. 1, we researched the agency (Customs and Border Protection), what it was buying and the urgency of the purchase. No. 2, we developed strong working relationships with the program owners and the other teaming partners. No. 3, we clearly articulated the value that InTEROS brought to the table and how it met the teaming partner and government's contract needs.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? It took less than six months, which is relatively quick.

What was the (first) contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? Customs and Border Protection, within Homeland Security, was the first agency we worked with. The final award amount was almost \$800,000. InTEROS was brought in to optimize the supply chain process, to get an accurate record of the current inventory and to work with the agency to document its requirements and provide options for commercially available supply chain and inventory tracking software that would meet its needs. There were four drivers for our decision to pursue this particular opportunity:

1. We knew there was a need.
2. We had previously established relationships with the prime contractor.
3. As it was a civilian agency, it was interested in leveraging best commercial solutions and practices, which is one of InTEROS' value offerings.
4. We knew that future growth opportunities existed.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting your first contract? The toughest challenge InTEROS always faces is in the contract realm (i.e., how will the agency be able to procure from us?). Most of our work is under the title of "full and open"--none of it is via a small business set-aside. We have a GSA vehicle, though many agencies would rather use their own contracting vehicles. [The government centralizes some of its purchasing through the GSA. Under its GSA Schedule program, the GSA establishes long-term contracts that allow agencies to order certain commercial supplies and services directly from GSA contractors.]

It then becomes a teaming opportunity to find the right teaming partner, with the right contracting vehicle [through which] the agency would like to work with you.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you? Responding to the customer, first and foremost. Critical to our ability to secure a large contract early on was our ability to understand and provide relevant recommendations based on the InTEROS team's depth of knowledge and experiences.

As you've received subsequent contracts, have they all been similar, have they grown in size or are they in various different areas? InTEROS has been awarded multiple contracts. All of the contracts have been similar in that they help agencies streamline their operations and achieve efficiencies. They have each grown in scope of work. They have also been awarded across different agencies, including DoD--Navy and Defense Logistics Agency and DHS--Customs and Border Protection. Currently, InTEROS operates in the U.S., Pacific Rim and mainland Europe.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract? Research, research, research.

1. Research the agencies you want to sell to.
2. Research what the agencies are buying.
3. Research what companies are already working there.
4. Research how the agency likes to procure.
5. Research the current and future needs of the customer as it relates to your company's offering.

At the end of the day, your research should tell you where the opportunities are and what holes you'll need to fill to fully meet your customer's needs.

Name: Michelle Crumm

Name of Business: Adaptive Materials

Location: Ann Arbor, Mich.

Description of business: Develops and manufactures solid oxide fuel cells that deliver portable power to military and commercial markets.

Relationship with Give Me 5: Supporter and active member of WIPP

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Adaptive Materials is a prime contractor to the U.S. armed services. We work with various military units to deliver portable power for use by soldiers, unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned ground vehicles.

How did you prepare for the opportunity? We did a lot of homework. We looked at the void in the market--batteries provide portable power that's limited and generators provide a lot of power but aren't portable. Adaptive Materials fills that gap. Once we had the basic need identified, we took our value proposition a few steps further. Adaptive Materials recognized that competing fuel cells are powered by hard-to-find, expensive fuel like hydrogen, so we developed our fuel cells to run off propane. It's available in every corner of the globe, it's safe, it's lightweight and it's inexpensive. It's easy to explain how to power our fuel cell--it's the same approach as connecting fuel to a grill or camping stove. We also made sure our system, unlike competitors' systems, could hybridize with a battery, thus making Adaptive Materials' fuel cells useful for recharging battery-powered devices.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? Within the first year the company was established, in 2000.

What was the first contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? Our first contract was for \$1 million, from DARPA. Since the company wanted to work

collaboratively on a technology that would be useful in the field, DARPA was the right choice for us. DARPA funding helped Adaptive Materials continue to develop its fuel cell and have the fuel cells field tested as a way to inform future product developments.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract?

A challenge for Adaptive Materials was translating our research and development into manufacturing. To have a great idea and proven technology is only part of the equation; we had to transition our business model to include manufacturing of fuel cells. Of course, with manufacturing comes a whole new set of challenges like production time, supplier relations and quality control. The upside of facing these challenges is that it provided long-term scalability. We're now at a point where we can manufacture 1,000 fuel cells a week. We married our research and development teams with manufacturing talent, creating a robust team that can create portable power from raw materials to completed product.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you?

The fact that Adaptive Materials fuel cells fill a market void and address real challenges cinched the deal. Additionally, our fuel of choice--easily sourced, inexpensive and lightweight propane--helped show that Adaptive Materials had thought not just about functionality but logistics, too. Finally, and this is helpful in business generally, we've been a responsive partner committed to developing products based on customer needs, and working to improve those products as customer needs evolve.

As you've received subsequent contracts, have they all been similar, have they grown in size or are they in various different areas?

Adaptive Materials has continued to receive funding in various amounts from DARPA. Additionally, we have received funding from the U.S. Army's Communications-Electronics Research, Development, and Engineering Center (CERDEC). We also have worked on other contracts for the U.S. government that we are unable to discuss/disclose.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract?

Do your homework. Take the time to understand the competition, the needs, what will make you different and how you'll solve the problem better. The end result will not only be potential for a government contract, but a better product that's filling a void in the market and has great potential.

Name: Christine Bierman

Name of Business: Colt Safety

Location: St. Louis

Description of business: Industrial safety supply company

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Why? When I get orders, it's as a prime. I have approached many agencies and prime contractors offering to work through them even in the government's mentor prot@g@ program, but to date have been unsuccessful.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? Many years. Colt Safety has been registered with CCR and original Pronet since the early 1980s. I regularly visit in person with and call on the telephone many contacts for my product line in a handful of chosen industries who I know use my product daily.

What was the first contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? The first real and large contract for \$400,000 was through the Department of Defense and the Justice Department in 1999, when the pope came to St. Louis. I worked the project through our local fire department, which was responsible for preparing our area's first responders for a potential mass casualty event.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract? Once I got to the right folks--in this case our fire chief and our local hazmat team--it was a piece of cake. They knew we could deliver product under rushed conditions and in the middle of a snowstorm.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you? Our quality managed practices, excellent customer care and our technical expertise.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract? Hire a full-time retired government contractor, and that would be his or her only job.

Name: Patricia Fisher

Name of Business: JANUS Associates Inc.

Location: Stamford, Conn.; Boston; Baltimore; Silver Spring, Md.

Description of business: Full-service information security/business continuity/eDiscovery/biometrics consulting firm

Relationship with Give Me 5: Interested in helping other women

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Why? We are both a prime and a sub. There are contracts that are of a size or in our core specialties area, and we try to prime those. On others, where our type of work may be a small portion of the overall task or where the project is very large or broadly scoped, it is often better to present a full team.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? JANUS focused on getting a GSA Schedule contract established as its entry point to the federal government, since this is the basis for many awards. Once we had this (which was a lengthy process), we contacted other federal vendors to try to subcontract to them. At the same time, we submitted proposals on our own for work within our core. It took approximately nine months to receive some actual work.

What was the first contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? The first contract was very small (approximately \$19,000) for security testing. We chose to go after it because it is our core specialty.

How did you prepare for the opportunity? Marketing to the federal government is a long and arduous task. Finding people who will want to have you propose on a task, waiting for a request for proposal, answering the RFP and waiting for a response requires many months--and sometimes years--to bring to fruition.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract? It was far more difficult getting the GSA Schedule contract set than actually getting the work.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you? Finally hiring a consultant who specialized in helping small firms get GSA contracts established.

As you've received subsequent contracts, have they all been similar, have they grown in size or are they in various different areas? We have received multiple contracts, all within our core but providing different services. Some years they are larger and in other years they are smaller (especially when beginning with a different federal agency).

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract? Be very persistent. Small business officers in federal agencies are in place to assist you--therefore, you should not feel that you are

pestering them if you call every few days. In this case, the squeaky wheel truly does get oiled. However, always be professional.

Name: Lisa Dolan

Name of Business: People's Accident Information Service Inc. dba Securit

Location: Flushing, N.Y.

Description of business: Licensed private investigations and security firm

Relationship with Give Me 5: WIPP member, Give Me 5 co-leader and member of Procurement Committee

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Prime contractor.

How did you prepare for the opportunity? Prior to identifying any contracts with the federal government, we made sure that we had substantial capital to support payroll for at least the first 90 days (anticipating a 60- to 90-day lag in payment). Once we knew we could support the payroll for 90 days, we then set our sights on identifying contracts in geographical areas we could perform in.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? We registered in 2000 and were awarded our first contract in October of 2004.

What was the first contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? The first contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was for \$96,000. It was sole-sourced to us as a non-compete because of our status as an 8(a) certified firm. We were contracted to supply unarmed guards, with an option for armed guards when needed.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract? Each contract had its own challenge, whether it was retraining, hiring new employees or not retaining a majority of the incumbent's employees. The biggest challenge, though, was one of our larger contracts at a federal site. Under the Services Contract Act, the contractor has the option of paying the [union's 401(k)] fringe in cash or putting it in a benefit form. We roll the fringe into a benefit form. The union wanted it added to union members' hourly base wage. This would have caused our payroll taxes to increase significantly. The union was also asking for steep increases in hourly wages. We had many negotiations and finally were able to come to a settlement.

As you've received subsequent contracts, have they all been similar, have they grown in size or are they in various different areas? Since 2004, we have been awarded many federal contracts that have varied in size, but all have been larger than the first contract. All our government contracts are for security services. We were awarded the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and then the Smithsonian Institute-Cooper Hewitt Museum and the Internal Revenue Service, which was the largest at \$2.5 million. The contracts are in different geographic areas.

Name: Charlene Turczyn

Name of Business: CMW and Associates Corp.

Location: Springfield, Ill.

Description of business: CMW and Associates is a federal contracting firm specializing in four areas: information assurance; e-Learning; data management; and professional, administrative and management, including our HIPAA practice and Lean Six Sigma practice.

Relationship with Give Me 5: WIPP national partner. Instructor for Give Me 5 classes

Are you a prime contractor or a subcontractor? Why? CMW is a prime contractor. We prefer being prime because we control the cash flow rather than depending on another firm to pay us.

How did you prepare for the opportunity? We took approximately two years to enter the federal market space. We began the process in 2002. We hired people to assist us in learning how to do business with the federal government. Many of our consultants were former federal contracting officers. At least 95 percent of CMW and Associates' current employees have worked for the federal government or a defense contractor. We prefer individuals with a knowledge base in DOD or civilian federal agencies.

How long did it take to secure your first contract after you registered? We received our 8(a) in December of 2003 and received our first contract in September of 2004.

What was the first contract for, how much was it for, and why did you choose to go after that particular opportunity? Our first contract was with the Navy. We were contracted to provide an e-learning system. The subject was safety, and the project was initiated to reduce injuries and machine damage. It has grown to more than \$1 million in revenue--we are still doing work on this contract. CMW has a number of retired Navy personnel on staff and, as such, decided to focus on the Navy as one of our client agencies. We understood Navy processes because of our retirees. CMW and Associates currently is prime on Seaport E 8(a), which is a Navy vehicle.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in getting the contract? The greatest challenge in getting a contract is having the inside knowledge necessary to prove your firm can do the work required.

What would you say is the primary thing that cinched it for you? Our record for performance, which eventually earned a mention in the Congressional Record for work at the Department of Labor in 2008.

As you've received subsequent contracts, have they all been similar, have they grown in size or are they in various different areas? CMW has received multiple contracts. We currently do business with the USDA, Navy, Air Force, National Guard, GSA Buildings, U.S. Army, Coast Guard, Department of Labor and HUD. CMW currently holds three GSA schedules: MOBIS, Temp Services and Schedule 70. Most of our contracts continue to grow in size and scope.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to secure a federal contract?

Do your homework: Understand what you are up against and, if you do win, do the best job that you can.

Name: Laurie Simon

Name of Business: Umbrella Consulting

Location: Seattle

Description of business: Business and technology solutions firm

Relationship with Give Me 5: WIPP member

Where are you in the process of securing a federal contract? My company has not applied for a contract yet, but we search on a daily basis for the right contract that will fit our business model, budget and core competencies. We find that contracts distributed by government-affiliated agencies are either too large (bundled), or we receive the opportunity too late. In some cases, the contracts are already awarded or soon to be awarded.

I hired a full-time employee to research contracts, look for partnering opportunities and determine if we can sub under prime contractors due to the contracts being bundled in large amounts.

My role as CEO is to meet with other WBE, OMWBE and WBENC companies so we can partner on opportunities. We are meeting with prime contractors through WIPP looking for complementary core competencies, and plan to bid soon.

Our research shows there are multiple databases that distribute contracts. We are looking at paying for a service that distributes contract opportunities, but the cost is \$6,000 to \$10,000 per year. This is a large expense for a small company. We may look for companies that have the service and pay them to search contracts for us.

Why do you think you haven't yet been successful? Too many databases to look through for contract opportunities. Large expense to apply for government vehicle (approximately \$10,000 to \$15,000). Large expense for investing in the right database. The WIPP education series is helping, but there is still so much more to learn from a detailed perspective.

Are you going to keep trying? If so, what will you do differently? Absolutely we will keep trying. We are getting smarter along the way. My first article in The New York Times was published in September, and I set a goal of being a prime or subprime and to win a contract within one year. I have another six months to be successful at reaching my goal. How will I do this?

1. Find the right partner.
2. Look for investment/funding to obtain a government vehicle, the right database and employ a full-time resource for reviewing contracts.
3. Hire a contract/RFP expert to help complete the bid.
4. Embrace continuing education (WIPP, Advanced WIPP Opportunities, etc.).
5. Be persistent.

Learn about the Give Me 5 program and get [tips on federal contracting](#) from Barbara Kasoff, executive director of Women in Public Policy.

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