

RESPONDING TO A SOURCES SOUGHT OR REQUEST FOR INFORMATION NOTICE

Purpose and value:

It is important to understand the purpose and value of a Sources Sought/Request For Information (RFI). For the agency, they are trying to identify sources. They are trying to determine if there is potential for a small business set-aside (SBSA) or other type of set-aside. For the vendor, it is a chance to help influence the potential for a SBSA. If capable companies do not respond, then a set-aside may be lost and the actual opportunity to bid will be competing against large business firms. The agency depends on the results of the market research. Occasionally firms call and say that they know that there are several SB firms that can do the work and they want to know why the buy is not set-aside. The problem is that none of the “capable” firms responded to the sources sought. They didn’t bother and figured they’d just bid when the buy came out. This is also a chance to be recognized as a potential source and to develop a positive image. This may be the agency’s first impression of you and your company. Your professionalism in work counts.

To respond or not:

It is important that you not respond just for the sake of responding. Some vendors are not capable but submit a single page standard line card in response to sources sought/RFI, perhaps in the hope of getting recognized for other work. All that does is develop a negative image of a company that isn’t putting forth effort and is wasting an agency’s time. If you are interested, respond specifically to the requirement at hand. Responding also takes time and effort and is an expense that can quickly mount up if you respond to everything. It is important to know where you fit in the market and the likelihood you will respond to a solicitation. If you are capable but not likely to respond, don’t create a false sense of potential sources. The sources sought, is looking for **capable sources that will likely respond** to the solicitation when published.

Good or bad it’s all you’ve got:

Most Contracting Officers are not given special training on sources sought/RFI notices. There is no direct guidance on establishing sources sought/RFI criteria. Many depend on their user to write the sources sought/RFI. In the end many sources sought announcements provide a statement of work and a request to provide capability - nothing more. Some have page limitations for response. Some do not.

So how do you respond?:

Understand that many of the elements described below may not be specifically requested in the sources sought announcement. But know this, that even if not requested, many agencies use this information or the lack of this information in determining capability. Many assumptions are made on the part of the reviewer. Putting this information into a response may make the difference between a determination of capability or lack of capability. The image they form of your company will in some fashion carry over to their view of your response to the actual solicitation later. Make this a best effort. Your job is not to just answer questions but to convince them of your capability. Show them SB can do the job right.

1. **Address each task or element specifically** and with detail – task by task. Don't just say "I can do complex accounting" or "I've done this under a contract with X agency.", give examples related to each task, be detailed in what types and how you have demonstrated that knowledge or skill. If the agency has not defined the key functions they want you to address, address all major functions in the SOW. Elements not addressed can be deemed as not having capability.
2. **Explain your capability level** – is it general knowledge, detailed knowledge, experience as prime or sub?
3. **Subcontractor functions** - If you were a subcontractor, what functions did you have? Were they core functions? What percentage of the contract did you handle?
4. **Locally relate** - Have you done the work in the past with this agency or other branch of the Government? If no, how quickly can you learn those regulations or do you have access to someone on your team that knows them? Have you handled this sort of situation before?
5. **Scope of the Contract** – Be sure to show understanding of the scope of the contract by responding with examples that match the scope of the contract. If there are inherent issues in the type of work, explain how you have handled those issues in the past or how you are set up to handle unexpected issues that may arise.
6. **Past performance** - Have you done this work with other agencies? Commercially? Or do your key personnel have the knowledge and experience? How does the work for them relate to this work for this agency?
7. **Identify contract experience** by identifying the contract number, agency, the scope/value of the contract, the length of the contract, the functions you did under the contract, and/or the role your company played. These details give the experience credibility.
8. **Identify any regulations, certifications, or equipment** you have or have used, that are necessary to the function of this requirement.
9. **Identify your intentions to team or subcontract** any work and what percentage of work you are capable of in your own right and what percentage you are subcontracting.
10. **Key personnel** – Identify the key personnel and their experience. What background do they bring to the effort and what certificates do they hold?
11. **Security Clearances** – Do you have a facility clearance? What clearances do your key personnel hold? Can you obtain cleared personnel?
12. **Address the need for new personnel.** Will your company have to hire to support this contract? If yes, where will you go to get personnel? How quickly can you obtain personnel? What kind of a retention plan do you have to keep personnel? If this will be a big growth step for your company how will you handle the sudden growth and its impact to managing your company? Do you have a growth plan?
13. **Management Skill** - If you have been mainly a subcontractor, do you have the skill to manage the contract as a prime? This is a big issue in the minds of contracting officers. You may have the skill to do the requirement but do you also have the management skill?
14. **Financial Capability** - Do you have the money to fund this contract? If not, then from whom will you get your credit line? Do you already have a credit line? Can you get one big enough to support this contract? Provide your creditors name and the amount you can cover.
15. **Transition Plan** - Do you have a plan to transition this contract from the previous vendor to you? Indicate if you have a plan and how long you believe the transition will take. What kind of Ramp Up time will you need to be in full swing? You do not have to provide the details of the plan at this time. Give examples of previous transition times on other contracts.

A good sources sought/RFI response answers the questions the agency asks, answers those they forgot to ask but will probably use in their mind, and demonstrates the professional quality and capability of your firm. It supports the notion that small business firms can provide quality work, and enables an agency to get to know your company – something that can trigger a call on other requirements and needs. If done right, it will put good thoughts and assumptions in their mind for future reference.

If you are limited on pages to respond to address all the requested information, make sure you state this in your response. If worst comes to worst, provide “additional information” as attachments. Most contracting officers will consider the attached information if the main body provided indicates potential capability. Though not a guarantee, that information is then available for the SB Specialist or PCR to use in argument of capability.