

The Gatekeeper's Top 5 Questions & What They Really Want to Know

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Marketing your business to a government prime contractor is much like selling to any other entity. You must find customers who can use your goods or services and convince them that your company is a capable vendor. While the Prime will happily provide mentoring and guidance to a small business owner (SBO) the last thing a prime contractor wants is to subcontract with a company that requires constant hand-holding and encouragement to perform normal tasks. As a result, you should be prepared to assure the Prime that you would make an excellent business partner without weighing down the Prime's own resources.

For the reasons explained above, when you make your first point of contact with the Prime's gatekeeper, whatever that position may be, this person is likely to quiz you rather rapidly on several key points. While some of this process may appear to be rather general in nature, others may seem quite specific and rather pointed. Even if the questions are softened in their delivery, the purposes of the questions remain the same and have been created to answer one overriding concern:

As a Prime, do I want to do business with this SBO?

To some folks the series of questions that emerge from the Prime feels a lot like an inquisition. However if you are well prepared, and well-rehearsed, your responses will advance you

beyond the gatekeeper to the next stage of demonstrating that you produce a quality product or service.

In the next section are the prime contractor's top five (5) most common questions. Before you make your first marketing call, it helps greatly if you write your responses and rehearse your delivery several times. When you feel confident with the flow of your responses, convert your written responses into bullet points. Then, as you talk, your responses will flow naturally and the bullets will serve to jog your memory instead of providing word-for-word recitation. This prevents the urge to "read" a response should you become nervous. Try to remember that you are marketing your company, the same as you would to any potential customer. As a result, your responses should sound confident, not too eager, and both flowing and unrehearsed. The end result is that you want to project your company as a capable vendor who is both experienced and successful. The bulleted approach will ensure your responses flow naturally and convincingly.

Listed below are the most common questions you are likely to hear from the Prime's gatekeepers. The position or title of the gatekeepers varies greatly depending upon the size and structure of the Prime. As a result, the person with whom you may make initial contact could be an executive assistant to the owner, a purchasing agent or one of several subcontract administrators within a large subcontracting department. Whatever the position, courtesy and appropriate etiquette are both very important.

In the listing below, I have provided two questions for each numbered reference or part. The first question in each part provides the actual question the Prime's gatekeeper is likely to ask. However, since questions usually have multiple purposes and meaning, beneath each bolded question is another question providing my interpretation of what the Prime is really trying to find out about you and your company.

Read these over and when you are ready to pursue a subcontract you will want to construct, and rehearse, appropriate responses as described earlier. There are other questions that will warrant the same rehearsals in order to sound convincing on the phone. Below is the first of such a listing.

Gatekeeper's initial five (5) questions

1. **What they ask:** Please tell me a little about your business.

What they want to know: What do you bring to the table?

2. **What they ask:** How much experience do you have at what you may provide to us?

What they want to know: What kinds of risks are associated with you?

3. **What they ask:** Where can I find information on your goods/services? Can you offer references or referrals from past customers?

What they want to know: Are you any good?

4. **What they ask:** Do you possess any quality certifications?
Or: Are you a member of any professional organizations in your unique field?

What they want to know: Can you be trusted to perform well and not embarrass us? Do your peers respect you?

5. **What they ask:** Have you had any experience in the past with tight deadlines and/or new regulations? What was the approach that made you successful in either situation? Were you successful?

What they want to know: Can you deliver? Can you adapt to USG contracting rules and regulations? Can you meet your deadlines? Will you conform to our approach?

I am often asked to describe the types of goods or services that are needed by prime contractors. My response is always the same: Everything. As stated by the Small Business Administration (SBA) the US Government is the single largest purchaser of goods and services in the world. Simply put, the US Government buys virtually everything--from paper clips to tactical gear and on to

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breakfast cereals. Whatever you are selling, a prime contractor is buying it, in one form or another, on behalf of the US Government. The trick is to find the right "form" and then market your product successfully to the Primes who need it.

You may also enjoy reading another article also found on this website, "How to Locate Prime Contractors".

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