

## Match Your Product to Agency Mission for SBIR/STTR Success

Finding the best agency to fund your new product idea can be frustrating. You've identified a market need and know exactly how to solve the problem of your preferred target customer. The only catch is that the agency does not share your enthusiasm for the proposed product or its market potential. How to proceed?

First of all, realize that many solid, and potentially profitable, product ideas are not suitable for the SBIR or STTR programs. Perhaps there's not enough innovation or the product simply does not match the agency's mission or research priorities.

Although a granting agency, such as the National Science Foundation, has such broad technology interests you're almost guaranteed to find a home for your idea...as long as it's innovative and has commercial potential...not all agencies are equally accommodating.

A contracting agency, such as the Department of Defense, generally wants you to help solve a specific technical problem of theirs (they publish more than 600 such problems every year). However, if your product idea does not directly address their problem they won't even read your proposal.

Between those two extremes lie both granting and contracting agencies. A granting agency might have a limited number of broad areas of interest that remain fairly stable from year-to-year, such as USDA. Others might have a recurring interest in a field, such as solar energy, but emphasize different problems or technologies within that field in each annual solicitation. Many of the contracting agencies operate similarly. Remember, the agencies use their SBIR/STTR programs to help achieve their overall mission.

Ultimately, it comes down to advice an entrepreneur hears all too often..."know your customer."

View the challenge as matching your company's product development interests and capabilities with the agency's mission and research priorities. You can:

- Search the award databases to discover whether an agency has previously funded projects similar to yours
- Talk to program officers...not only about your product but also about the broader capabilities of your company or your technology. You might educate them to new possibilities...and in the process uncover new opportunities for your company.
- Suggest topics ideas; several agencies actively solicit them.

If there's some interest from the agency but not a perfect match, consider ways to "customize" your project to better meet the agency's needs. Your flexibility and creative thinking might just pay off!