STARTER GUIDE · GROWTH SERIES

CONNECTIVE BUSINESS SOLUTION

STRATEGY RE-DEFINED

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTING STARTER GUIDE

From zero to registered, findable, and responding: the practical first steps of selling to government, in plain language, with every registration that should be free clearly marked as free.

Written For

Small Business Owners · Founders · First-Time Government Contractors

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This guide gets a small business from nothing to registered, visible to buyers, and capable of responding to its first opportunity. It is the mechanics companion to our strategy whitepaper, Government Contracting for Small Businesses: read that one to decide whether and how to build the practice; use this one to actually stand it up. Everything here is drawn from doing it ourselves: our firm completed every step below and holds two competitively awarded State of Florida term contracts.

> **THE MONEY-SAVING RULE**
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> Every government registration in this guide is free: SAM.gov, your UEI, your CAGE code, state vendor portals, and SBA certifications. Companies that charge to "register you with the government" are selling you a form. Free help exists too: APEX Accelerators (formerly PTACs) provide no-cost government contracting counseling nationwide.

01 / HOW GOVERNMENT BUYING WORKS, IN ONE PAGE

Agencies receive budgets and buy through contracting officers, the only people authorized to commit the government to a purchase. Small purchases move fast with minimal process; mid-size purchases run through simplified, often small-business-friendly procedures; large purchases run full competitions with formal proposals. Before many competitions, agencies publish market research notices, called Sources Sought or Requests for Information, asking who out there can do this work. Those notices are your real front door: responding to them makes you visible before the competition exists and can influence whether the work is set aside for small businesses at all.

You can sell as a **prime**, holding the contract directly, or as a **subcontractor** to an established prime, borrowing their past performance while building your own. New entrants should plan to do both, and should know that state and local government, with closer buyers and shorter cycles, is often the faster first market than federal.

02 / THE REGISTRATION CHECKLIST

Complete these in order. Each unlocks the next.

- ☐ **Form your entity and get your EIN.** A registered business with a federal tax ID and a business bank account is the entry ticket to everything below.
- ☐ **Register in SAM.gov (free).** This issues your Unique Entity ID (UEI), collects your representations and certifications, and makes you awardable. Use SAM.gov directly; renewal is annual and also free.
- ☐ **Receive your CAGE code.** Assigned automatically through SAM registration. Together, UEI and CAGE are how every buyer looks you up.
- ☐ **Choose your NAICS codes deliberately.** These industry codes determine how buyers find you and how small-business size standards apply. Pick the codes that match what you actually sell and can win, not everything imaginable.
- ☐ **Complete your SBA small business profile.** The Dynamic Small Business Search is where contracting officers and primes hunt for small businesses. An empty profile is a missed shop window.

- [ ] **Register in your state's vendor system.** States buy through their own portals, such as Florida's MyFloridaMarketPlace. If state and local is your entry lane, and it often should be, this registration matters as much as SAM.
- [ ] **Calendar the renewals.** SAM, state registrations, and certifications expire. An expired registration makes you invisible at exactly the wrong moment, so every renewal gets an owner and a reminder the day it is issued.

03 / CERTIFICATIONS AT A GLANCE

Certifications change who you compete against and make you valuable to primes with subcontracting goals. Apply for every one you legitimately qualify for; all of the government-run programs below are free to apply.

CERTIFICATION	WHO QUALIFIES (IN BRIEF)	WHERE IT HELPS
WOSB / EDWOSB	Majority owned and controlled by women who are US citizens.	Federal set-asides in designated industries; prime subcontracting goals.
8(a) Program	Majority owned by socially and economically disadvantaged US citizens; a nine-year development program.	Sole-source and set-aside federal awards; the strongest federal on-ramp for those who qualify.
HUBZone	Principal office and significant employment in designated underutilized zones.	Federal set-asides and price evaluation preference.
SDVOSB / VOSB	Majority owned and controlled by veterans or service-disabled veterans.	Federal set-asides, strongest within VA procurement.
State MBE / WBE / DBE	State-certified minority, women, or disadvantaged ownership; criteria vary by state.	State and local set-asides and goals; corporate supplier diversity programs.

> HONEST EXPECTATION
>
> Certifications open doors; they do not win work. Both contracts our firm holds were full competitive awards. The certifications earned attention; the offer won.

04 / YOUR FIRST CAPABILITY STATEMENT

One page, built for a skeptical reader with sixty seconds. Five blocks:

- **Identifiers, findable in five seconds:** UEI, CAGE, NAICS codes, certifications, and registrations, so a contracting officer can verify you immediately.
- **Core competencies:** what you sell, in the buyer's vocabulary, in five or six lines. Depth over breadth; a page that claims everything is discounted entirely.

- **Differentiators that are facts:** contract vehicles, certifications, and named delivery evidence. Delete every adjective that cannot survive the question "prove it."
- **Past performance or principal experience:** if the company is new, your leadership's delivery history inside larger organizations counts, framed truthfully as exactly that, with one scoped, numbered accomplishment beating a paragraph of claims.
- **A named contact:** a person, a phone number, an email. Buyers distrust suppliers hiding behind info@ inboxes.

05 / FINDING YOUR FIRST OPPORTUNITIES

- **Federal notices:** SAM.gov's Contract Opportunities section lists federal solicitations and, more importantly for you, the Sources Sought and RFI notices where new entrants get seen. Save searches on your NAICS codes and check them on a weekly rhythm.
- **State and local portals:** your state's procurement site and major county and city portals publish their own solicitations, often with less competition and shorter cycles.
- **Prime contractors:** large primes operate small business and supplier diversity offices whose job is finding firms like yours. Bring the capability statement and a specific statement of what you can take off their plate.
- **Free counseling:** your regional APEX Accelerator offers no-cost help with registrations, bid matching, and proposal review. Use it; it is what it is for.

06 / RESPONDING TO YOUR FIRST SOURCES SOUGHT

A Sources Sought response is not a proposal. It is a concise capability demonstration, typically a few pages: who you are with identifiers and certifications up front, direct statements of how you meet each capability listed in the notice, your relevant experience framed honestly, and clear answers to whatever questions the notice asks, in the order it asks them. Follow the instructions exactly, meet the deadline with room to spare, and do not send marketing fluff, pricing nobody asked for, or claims you cannot staff. The goal is simple: convince the agency that capable small businesses exist, and that you are one of them.

07 / YOUR FIRST 90 DAYS

- ☐ **Weeks 1 to 4:** entity and EIN confirmed; SAM.gov registration submitted; NAICS codes selected; state vendor registration filed; certification applications started.
- ☐ **Weeks 5 to 8:** capability statement finished and tested on someone skeptical; SBA profile completed; saved opportunity searches running weekly; APEX Accelerator meeting held.
- ☐ **Weeks 9 to 12:** first Sources Sought responses submitted; introductions made to two primes' small business offices; renewal calendar built with named owners; pursuit log started, including what you passed on and why.

08 / SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS
SOURCES SOUGHT	Market research notice asking who can perform upcoming work. Your visibility channel.
RFI	Request for Information: the agency is learning the market, not yet buying.
RFQ / RFP	Request for Quotes / Proposals: now they are buying. Follow the instructions to the letter.
SET-ASIDE	A competition restricted to small businesses or a certification category.
IDIQ / VEHICLE	A standing contract buyers order against for years. Winning one is winning shelf space.
CO / KO	The Contracting Officer: the only person who can bind the government.
FAR	The Federal Acquisition Regulation, the federal buying rulebook. States have their own.
PAST PERFORMANCE	Your verifiable delivery record, the currency of this market. Built one clean award at a time.

ABOUT CONNECTIVE BUSINESS SOLUTION

Connective Business Solution is a Business Performance and Advisory Firm based in Orlando, Florida, and a working small government contractor: WOSB and Florida MBE certified, SAM.gov and MyFloridaMarketPlace registered, and holder of two competitively awarded State of Florida term contracts. When you are ready for the strategy behind these mechanics, read our whitepaper, Government Contracting for Small Businesses: A Strategic Roadmap, or contact our team.

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