**Annex 10.2 Being Competitive in Pursuing Government Support**

Winning contracts from government agencies is only partly about writing good proposals. Indeed, the earlier section on challenges and opportunities points to various ways a firm can gain advantage in what appears to be a highly objective process. This section is not about writing proposals. Most think tanks learn this part of the craft early from the requirements of international foundations and donors. Rather, I concentrate here on how to cultivate relationships and develop advantages.

## Influencing the Agenda

A good way for an organization to establish itself as keenly aware of policy developments, and to help a government office organize its future research agenda, is to offer ideas for analytic projects that will support upcoming policy considerations. Proposed program evaluations are also good topics in principle, although most managers still do not appreciate the constructive role evaluations can play in improving program performance. Many think tanks use this “insiders” approach, both because it is good marketing and because they sincerely believe the research proposal is in the public interest.

The process of exploring a research idea with a government office begins by looking ahead a year or more to forecast what the office’s analytic needs may be then: what policy topics will be under active consideration? Once a topic is identified where your organization has some credibility, related policy research is identified and carefully considered. It is critical to have a meeting with the relevant officials rather than simply sending a document. The goal is to strengthen personal relationships as well as having a stimulating policy research discussion. Try to organize the meeting through an informal conversation with the official at an event or during a phone call.

It is good practice to have a one- to two-page summary to hand over—this leaves a record of the idea with the officials and indicates seriousness of purpose on the think tank’s part. While the officials will understand that this is a marketing meeting, it is important to focus on the substance of the research. The officials will appreciate the firm’s capabilities from the quality of the presentation and discussion. A successful meeting concludes with the officials believing the analysis will genuinely meet their needs.

Meetings of this type are also good opportunities to inquire about upcoming procurements so the organization can prepare to compete for these contracts. A particular “first mover” advantage is to be able to form a consortium with the best qualified partners.

A common mistake of think tanks is to stay on the same topic too long—that is, to keep proposing additional work on a topic on which analysis has already been done, usually by the firm proposing more analysis. With limited resources, program offices need to address many areas, and continuing to invest in a particular topic is unlikely. If the think tank continues to press, its leaders may find it harder to get appointments with the agency staff.

## Reputation

Officials often know what firm they want to do a specific task and work hard to structure the procurement so they get their choice. This means a firm’s reputation in particular areas is critical to being invited to bid on limited competition contracts. Past performance is obviously a factor; and if there is reason to believe the official (perhaps a new official) does not fully appreciate the institute’s record, sending a well-crafted, targeted letter and brochure can be effective.

But it is equally important from time to time to remind these officials of the think tank’s capabilities. Common ways of doing this include sending them hard copies of reports that are expected to be of special interest to a particular office; including relevant clients and potential clients on the distribution list for e-mails that summarize new research and include links to reports that can be downloaded; and inviting clients to relevant events the institute organizes, such as roundtable discussions or particularly relevant staff presentations—a personal phone call is often very effective in this all-internet era in encouraging attendance. Where appropriate invite clients to make comments.

## Being Attentive

Actions on this list go beyond those designed to keep the institution’s good name and reputation before the relevant officials. The following are examples of actual think tank actions to promote themselves to government clients:

Most think tanks have annual parties of some type to which clients can be invited. Christmas and New Year are common occasions. Some have summer outings—picnics or boat cruises.

Many think tanks send greeting cards on the major holidays and remember the milestone birthdays.

One think tank offered to brief a new deputy minister unfamiliar with the subject of his new responsibilities on the general structure and key issues in the sector. The official accepted and spent a half-day being briefed.

A think tank learned that a senior official liked to interact professionally with young people. The institution had several staff who regularly taught university courses and arranged for the official to give a guest presentation to one of the classes.

Occasionally a think tank has the chance to influence the composition of a team being sent abroad on a study tour. Including an important client when the topic is appropriate is generally very appreciated.

Many think tanks take the kind of initiatives listed just above and those under “Reputation.” It is important to implement these initiatives systematically and not just as an impulse or afterthought. A junior staffer can easily be tasked with managing the process of keeping track of opportunities and asking his/her superior if certain actions should be taken.

## Respect

At a conference in summer 2005 on cooperation between government agencies and policy research organizations, presentations were made on contracting out.[[1]](#footnote-1) Government officials from several countries made the point that it is critical for think tank leaders and experts to show a certain level of respect to the officials. This is not about respect for the office. Rather, the problem is that analysts talk down to officials, making it far too evident that the experts are just that and the officials are not. This may seem a small point, but it is not to the officials. Think tank senior managers should be very alert to the attitudes of their staff and, where required, do the coaching required.

## Partnering

A central point in the section on doing business with government agencies is that winning awards in many countries is an insiders’ game. An established reputation in the topic area at hand is very important. One way to become more competitive for certain contracts is to partner with another firm with complementary skills. In other words, both organizations benefit from adding the other’s capabilities in competing for a specific project.

Consider the example of a housing ministry interested in improving the targeting of its housing allowance program, so subsidies are concentrated on very low income families. One firm has detailed knowledge of the country’s housing programs but does not know much about targeting social programs. The second firm has a strong reputation in the social assistance area, including the targeting of benefits under cash transfer programs to the very poor, but it knows nothing about housing programs. The combined expertise of the two firms yields very strong credentials for the project. Naturally, not all competitions will lend themselves to such combinations, but it is certainly an option to consider regularly.

Forming the partnership in such cases is clearly very important. But it is equally important to make sure the client office appreciates the capabilities of the combined firms. A joint meeting of the two firms with the program office is a necessity if at all possible, particularly under a limited competition when the program office decides which firms are invited to submit proposals. Sending a written statement about the combination and the intentions to work together on this type of project is probably the next best approach. A follow-up phone call is very important.

A frequent problem is that proposal managers wait too long to identify possible partners and even longer to initiate contact. As soon as there is a reasonable expectation that a competition will be held and the topic fairly well defined, the first task is securing highly qualified partners—both firms and individual consultants.

## Learning from Failed Efforts

Most think tanks lose at least as many competitions as they win. Sometimes the reasons for losing are idiosyncratic, but there may be systematic problems with the firm’s approach as well. The great majority of think tanks (and for-profit firms for that matter) do not devote sufficient resources to learning from lost bids.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Institutions can undertake at least two actions to improve future proposals’ chances of success. The first is to request a debriefing from the agency that held the competition. At such debriefings, someone involved in the selection process will inform the think tank representatives of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal compared with those submitted by other firms. Perhaps the price was too high, insufficient time was budgeted for the project director, or the proposed approach overlooked a key methodological point. Usually statements will be fairly general; but, if listened to carefully, they will signal the significant problems. This information is clearly very useful for a losing firm. Another, indirect benefit: agency staff often takes note of which firms ask for debriefings and are often impressed by the diligence of those who make the effort to learn for the future.

Think tank leaders participating in such debriefings must guard against complaining and challenging statements made by the official, unless there is clear evidence that the basic procedures governing the competition were violated. Complaining will leave an unconstructive impression and may negatively affect the attitude of those reviewing proposals in the future.

Not all agencies routinely provide such briefings. Whether they are obliged to do so depends on the procurement regulations. It is difficult to generalize on this point, as the provisions differ among countries. If the regulations give bidders the right to a debriefing but the agency resists giving one, the contractor will have to weigh whether it is worth aggravating the agency to get the debriefing.

The second action a think tank can take is to convene a meeting of those who took part in preparing the proposal and systematically go through their technical proposal—both technical and cost elements. The main elements to consider in the technical proposal are the following:

* Quality of staff proposed—did they really have the right qualifications and experience for their assigned tasks?
* The project’s organizational structure—was the amount of time proposed for each person adequate? Was control over certain functions (for example, a household survey) adequate? If subcontractors were involved, were lines of authority among all parties clear? Was it clear who would be directly answerable to the agency-customer?
* Quality of approach to the research or analysis—was what was being proposed absolutely clear? In rereading the RFP, can any issues be identified that were not explicitly addressed in the proposal? Was the scheduling of the work realistic? Did the different activities logically relate in time to each other?

After the review of this particular proposal, think tank managers should study the findings of similar reviews for other proposals in the past several months to identify patterns. In addition, it should examine the results of other competitions with the same government office to detect a pattern in what the competition offered compared with the think tank’s proposal.

A similar, detailed review of the cost proposal should also be undertaken. The analysis should be especially careful if the institution lost on price by a wide margin. Comments from various think tanks, combined with discussions with government officials in offices that are contracting for research, suggest that government clients often do not really appreciate the relationship between price and the quality of the product they receive. There seems to be a sense that contractors either pad their budgets substantially or have some reserve funds to “top up” the contracted amount if it is necessary to maintain quality. The reality, of course, is that think tanks generally do neither. Unfortunately, it will probably take some years before typical officials contracting for research become more discerning in terms of product quality.

1. “Beyond Analysis—The Broader Role of Policy Research Organizations in BiH,” Jahorina (Sarajevo), Bosnia, July 14–16, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Darling and others (2005) include an excellent discussion about learning from mistakes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)