SBIR · STTR
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COURSE 4, TUTORIAL 1

HOW DO I FIND THE APPROPRIATE TOPIC?

If you want to submit an SBIR/STTR proposal, you must first find a relevant topic at one of the participating Agencies. The SBIR or STTR programs do not accept "unsolicited proposals," but instead require that you respond to one of their current topics, even if they are very broad topics like those found at many of the Agencies that make their SBIR/STTR awards as grants vs. contracts. All Agencies list their topics in their solicitation or Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA). The only exception is the Department of Energy which publishes a separate topic list several weeks before it releases its FOA.

SEARCHING TOPICS ELECTRONICALLY

In the early days of SBIR/STTR, you had to read a paper copy of the solicitation from beginning to end to see if there were any relevant topics. Now that the solicitations are all distributed electronically, it is much faster, easier, and more productive to find topics by using search engines. Type in your key word(s), and the search engine goes through the currently open topics (or, at your option, topics that closed in the recent past) and tells you which topics contain your key word(s).

GRANTS.GOV & FEDBIZOPPS

There are a variety of search engines to choose from. **Grants.gov** can be used to search across all Agencies for all types of awards including SBIR and STTR. However, if you use Grants.gov, be aware that it only searches Agencies that make awards as grants. A little less than half of all SBIR/STTR awards are made as grants, as more than 50%

> **"There are some cross-agency search engines that focus strictly on SBIR/STTR programs such as SBIR.gov."**

are made as contracts. To search contract opportunities, you can use **FedBizOpps**. Again, this tool is not limited to SBIR/STTR, but searches across contracting opportunities provided by Federal Agencies; it does not cover grants. In addition to these two sources, many of the larger awarding Agencies do have their own search engines associated with their SBIR/STTR program.

SBIR.GOV

There are some cross-Agency search engines that focus strictly on the SBIR/STTR programs. Some of these search engines are free, while others are only available for a charge. Of the free search engines, the best is **SBIR.gov**. To find out which Agencies fund topics of interest, it is actually suggested that you use keywords and search awards that have already been made. In this way, you can determine which Agencies have historically funded

To search SBIR/STTR topics electronically, the following three search engines are a good place to start:

» Grants.gov

» FedBizOpps

» SBIR.gov

topics of interest. Then, you will need to determine if those Agencies currently have open solicitations, as the timeframe when Agencies release solicitations and accept proposals varies throughout the year. Once you have pinpointed the most appropriate Agency, search open solicitations using the key words that you found to be most relevant when searching past awards. By the way, we recommend that you start your search using broad terms as key words and see how many hits you secure. Then, experiment with the terms and generate synonyms and/or more refined terms to use in your search strategy. Results will vary depending upon the terms you use. You don't want to reach the conclusion that Agencies do not have an interest in a given topic, simply because you used the wrong word in your search strategy.

Agencies are looking for SBIR/STTR projects that, if feasible and successful, will be commercialized.

IS THE TOPIC A GOOD FIT?
Once you find open solicitations with topics that are of interest, you need to determine if this is truly a good opportunity for you to pursue. This can be done using a three-step process.

First, make an honest assessment of whether your idea really fits with the topic, or if you are unintentionally trying to force a fit. It is not unusual for companies to try and force fit their interests with a topic description. Unfortunately, this typically results in a proposal that isn't really what the Agency wants, and the proposal may quickly be rejected in the evaluation process. Read and reread the topic carefully, looking for key words that suggest limits on the Agency's interests. Try to "read between the lines" to gain an understanding of what the topic author (TA) really wants.

Second, review any literature cited or referenced in the topic description. This can lead to a deeper understanding of the topic

and the Agency's interest. It also can strengthen your proposal, if you reflect in your writing that you have read and understand the importance and relevance of the referenced literature.

Third, establish a dialog with the Agency's TA to secure clarification on the topic. This will help you determine what is and is not of interest. This dialog is preferably done by phone, although it can be accomplished via email, if that is the TA's preference. Develop your questions in advance. If you reach out by phone, keep the call to about 10 minutes. Briefly ask questions and pause so that the TA can provide you with information. Remember, you learn more by listening to the TA. By the way, be sure to see the tutorial on how to have a productive conversation with a topic author.

SPEAKING WITH TOPIC AUTHORS
Realize that some Agencies, like NASA and DOT - both contracting Agencies - do not allow you to speak to TAs, while others, like the DOD and DHS, will allow you to speak with TAs only during a specified pre-release period. By contrast, you can typically talk to TAs at granting Agencies - such as NIH, DOE and NSF - at any time.

COMMERCIALIZATION IS THE GOAL
Agencies are looking for SBIR/STTR projects that, if feasible and successful, will be commercialized. Therefore, if you are only interested in securing funding to conduct basic research in your field of interest, that is not going to appeal to the proposal reviewers at the Agency. You must be genuinely interested in bringing the technology to the marketplace. In closing, please take a look at the demo of how to conduct a topic search under the Tools section of this tutorial.