

TUTORIAL #33

If I don't win, should I get a debrief and try again?

Approximately one out of ten Phase I Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) or Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) proposals submitted to the Department of Energy (DOE) will receive an award. Therefore, there's a good chance that your first proposal won't win. So, when you receive an email from DOE notifying you that you have not won – should you give up? The answer to that question is simple – NO – you should not give up. You will be disappointed given the amount of effort that you put into developing your application – but you should not give up.

Proposal writing is a skill, and learning what a potential new customer wants is an art. It takes time to learn both – so the answer is no, you should not give up. Instead, take every opportunity to learn what mistakes you made (if any) and learn what you can do better in the future.

READ REVIEWER COMMENTS

If you receive a rejection notice from DOE, it will come via email. The notice will contain information about how you can access the reviewer's comments from PAMS – the Portfolio Analysis and Management System. The first thing you should do is download the reviewer's comments and review them in detail. You will notice that each reviewer's comments are grouped into the three Merit Review categories that were discussed in Tutorial 7. See if there is a pattern to their responses. Don't only notice those items with which they found fault, but also those items which they found to be strengths.

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In the case of DOE – receipt of the reviewer's comments constitutes the debrief. Not every agency provides this level of feedback and it can be most instructive, although you probably won't take it that way the first time you experience a

The Merit Review is comprised of three categories:

NO. 1

Scientific/Technical Approach

NO. 2

Cost-effectiveness

NO. 3

Impact

proposal rejection. But, let's look at what you can learn from the feedback.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

One of the primary evaluation criterion is the Scientific/Technical Approach. If your feedback indicates that the approach was not innovative; that the challenge was not significant; or that you did not make a thorough presentation – what can you do next time? Talk to the technical monitor, review the literature, and have a solid red team review to assure that what you propose in the future is innovative.

The next criterion is the ability to carry out the project in a cost-effective manner. Let's assume that the feedback raises questions about the qualifications of the private investigator (PI), questions the facilities, and your work plan. What can you do? Spend more time at the outset evaluating how you can strengthen the profile of your bid

team by including contingent hires, a university, or a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFDRC). Take the time before the next cycle to reach out to people in anticipation of the next opportunity to bid.

The final Merit criterion is “impact.” If the feedback provided indicates that the anticipated results are unlikely to have a significant technical or economic impact; are unlikely to lead to a marketable product; or, attract other funding – it is likely that you did not spend enough time considering the commercial impact of your work or conversely you considered it, but did not provide a clear explanation as to its benefit.

Take the opportunity to learn from every rejection and develop a plan to win the next time around. There is ample evidence that companies that write more proposals, win more proposals – but only if they also learn from the feedback provided.