

TOOLKIT

By Jamie Oliver

First get your act neatly together

How to win government contracts

✓ DO put your house in order. There has never been a better time to pitch for government contracts, according to Richard Felstead, a director at R&D Information Services. Two things are vital, he says - the quality of the service being offered (including price) and the company itself.

"The government tries to deal only with reputable companies that have the capacity to deliver the services they claim, without breaking the law in any way," he says. Also, be prepared to hand over background information on the company, including equal opportunities, health and safety, environmental policies and quality management systems. Felstead recommends two useful websites: www.supplyinggovernment.gov.uk and www.ogcbuyingsolutions.gov.uk.

✗ DON'T rely on your looks. When it comes to pitching for new contracts, usually it's a case of getting out the best suit, getting your hair cut and generally making The Right Impression. Not so with public sector pitches, according to Trenton Moss, a director of Webcredible, an internet consultancy. "That's the odd thing. Some of the biggest public sector contracts we have won haven't included actually meeting anyone face to face. "We're glad to meet people, especially since it can build a rapport, but they haven't been interested. "A couple of phone calls and emails are enough."

✓ DO respect. Sarah McVittie is chief executive of 82ask, a mobile phone "question answering" service. She found young people were using the service and many were asking personal, sexual health-type questions. She had a thought. Why not try to find work with the Department of Health? McVittie admits progress is slow but she hopes the effort will be worth it, both commercially and in terms of the boost it will give to the company's reliability and standing. "You have to

understand and respect how government works and the protocols they follow," she says.

✗ DON'T think glossy always wins. Lorraine Purcell is head of procurement, partnering and programme management at Sheffield City Council.

"One of the things that we do here is to hold regular 'meet the buyer' events and we encourage SMEs to come along," she says.

"We have also done a lot of presentations to a diverse audience including the voluntary sector and social enterprises to debunk some myths: eg, it isn't always the biggest, glossiest tender that wins."

✓ DO research. "Just because government issues formal contract notices doesn't mean the bid should be overly rigid," says Claire Kinloch, managing director of Glasgow-based marketing business bd-ntwk/scotland. She says: "Call and speak to someone about the contract; do your research about the public body and where it's heading; don't limit your response to just the project advertised; and insist on feedback if your bid is unsuccessful."

✗ DON'T forget the jargon. Plaid Cymru MP Elfyn Llwyd has advice for would-be government suppliers:

- 1) Take every opportunity to praise New Labour and all it stands for (whatever that may be);
 - 2) Consider donations to party funds and/or to unfortunate and unpopular schemes such as foundation schools;
 - 3) Learn to speak in jargon: "blue skies, pushing the envelope, stakeholders and outside the box" will help;
 - 4) Always be politically correct in word, thought and deed.
- But don't, he adds, "express any opinion that might not accord with the Government's and don't worry that the IT equipment you are selling it is no good (that should not be an impediment to repeat orders)".