



Match Game

50,000 REASONS TO GET READY FOR A BUSINESS MATCHMAKING EVENT

BY MARK HENRICKS

When Don Stoneham attended a Business Matchmaking event in Oakland, California, last spring, he was looking forward to the chance to have 15-minute face-to-face meetings with representatives of some of the more than 150 government agencies and large corporations attending. He left disappointed, but not in the event. He felt let down by his own lack of preparation. “I wasted a lot of valuable time by having the buyer explain the purchasing process to me,” says Stoneham, 47 and founder of 82-person business and technology consulting company Agape Enterprises in Dublin, California. “I only get one chance to make a favorable impression and I knew I had to be better prepared.”

Stoneham was right about two major features of the Business Matchmaking events, which give small businesses a chance to meet with representatives of government agencies and prime government contractors and other corporations. First, the events are great opportunities, says Debbie Ridgely, director of the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization for the Department of Health and Human Services. “If you’re just starting out and want to get a flavor of what it’s about, this is one-stop shopping,” Ridgely says of the Business Matchmaking events which are put on several times a year by HP and SCORE, along with other corporate partners. Several federal agencies also host their own direct procurement events, including the Department of Energy, which has a major national program produced for them by the Business Matchmaking team.

Second, it’s critical that business owners prepare for these once-in-a-while opportunities. All business representatives get the same 15 minutes. But not all use them equally. Of the 50,000 such face-

to-face get-togethers that have occurred at Business Matchmaking events, resulting in over \$750 million in contracts for entrepreneurs like Stoneham, organizers say some small business owners are disappointed due to lack of preparation. “You need to be ready to do business,” says Theresa Avillar-Speake, director of the office of minority economic impact and diversity at the Department of Energy. “They’re not there to teach you how to do it.” At the same time, Chuck Ashman, Executive producer of the official Business Matchmaking program, reports that the vast majority of participating small business owners understand the opportunity and more than 90% of appointments booked are rated as satisfactory or better by the government and private sector buyers.

Being ready for a Business Matchmaking event starts with registration. It’s a good idea to register as soon as the event opens for signups. Some events are large, such as the OSDBU annual get-together each spring in Maryland, where some 2,500 businesses come to meet with government buyers. Others are much

smaller and registration is limited. It’s first-come, first-serve, so if you wait until the last minute, you may get turned away. The Business Matchmaking events produced by SCORE, HP and this year’s partner corporations, including Aflac, FedEx, AT&T, Yellow Pages, RIM, American Airlines, MasterCard and National Merchant Center require no fee from any attending small business owner for registration.

Participation in the official Business Matchmaking events requires registration with the Central Contractor Registration (CCR), which is the vendor database for the entire federal government (www.ccr.gov). Agencies and companies each have their own dedicated procedures, but only CCR registration is required to enter the Business Matchmaking arena.

The Business Matchmaking registration team is available to assist small businesses in correctly identifying their company’s products and services. This helps in making the face-to-face matches more effective. According to Diane Kegley, Business Matchmaking Producer,

“the combination of emails, phone calls and code checking before each event assures us high levels of efficiency.”

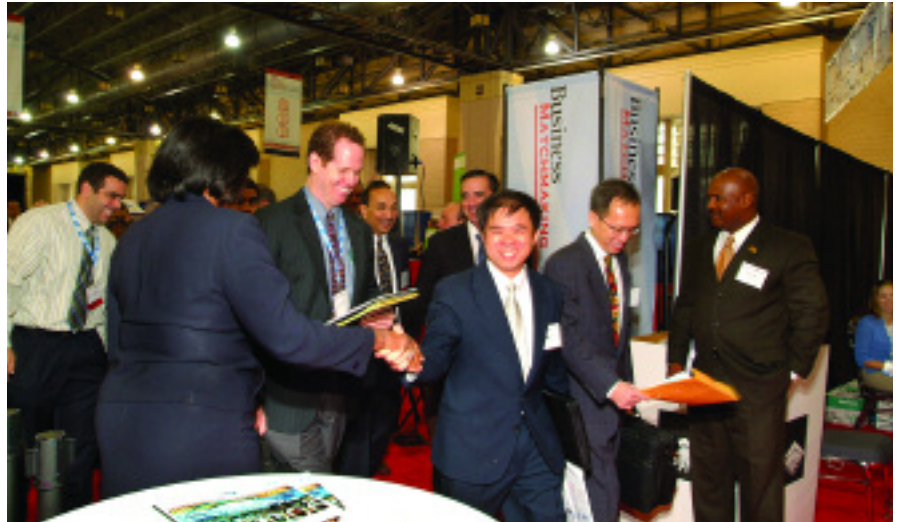
There are various special categories that can enable small businesses to increase their opportunities, particularly in dealing with government agencies. Proper certification is important. Women-owned, minority-owned, veteran and disabled veteran-owned companies should be sure that their companies are properly classified. The SBA, SCORE and Small Business Development Centers all provide free assistance in those processes.

The General Services Administration schedule is often relied upon as a guideline for pricing and procurement opportunities. Again, SCORE is a particularly good starting place to gain information about how it works.

Now start learning about the buyers. Visit websites for government agencies and corporate prime contractors. The official Business Matchmaking web site (www.businessmatchmaking.com) will introduce prospective small business participants to government agencies and private corporations attending. There are links to several, and the more preparation an entrepreneur does the better chance he or she will have to maximize benefits when they come face-to-face with the buyers.

At various web sites, you'll find all kind of information about selling as a small business. Government agencies have forecasts detailing specific amounts and contracts they want to steer to small business. You can get similar information from some corporations. Both types have information on past contracts awarded to small business. Studying these can help you identify which buyers are most likely to be interested in your offerings.

The Business Matchmaking events,



Gentlemen (and ladies!) start your engines ... a group of small business owners prepare to enter the Business Matchmaking meeting room at a recent event. Since its inception in 2003, Business Matchmaking has generated nearly a Billion Dollars in contracts for participating small businesses.

Produced by California-based SMA Global, utilize a sophisticated matching technology developed by Dimensions International. It has raised the bar in procurement efficiencies and enables small businesses to select targeted buyers for appointments.

It's important to narrow your focus on customers, but extend your time frame. Focus is important because of the vast scale and complexity of dealing with an entity the size of government. “You can't begin to try to sell to the federal government at large,” Ridgely advises. Pick one or two department-level agencies and try to get your foot in the door.

Timing is also critical, and it's vital to look far ahead. One way to pursue a contract is looking at CCR for small business contractors who are about to leave the program because they have grown too large. “If a company is graduating and a new one's coming along, are you a good match?” Ridgely asks. But you have to look ahead. “Government agencies fill requirements 18 to 24 months in advance, Ridgely notes. “If something expired at the end of this month or even

this year, you're way behind the eight ball,” she says.

Once you've refined what you have to offer and researched your prospective customers, you're ready for the meat of the matter: The presentation! Prepare and practice your presentation until you can do it smoothly and briefly, Kegley recommends. SMA Global inaugurated the current Business Matchmaking initiative with a partnership between the US Small Business Administration and Hewlett-Packard. “We still rely heavily upon the individual expertise of SBA speakers, panelists and counselors at our events,” Kegley added.

The Department of Energy suggests a Business Matchmaking meeting presentation should start with a two-minute introduction and company overview. Devote three minutes to describing your products and services. Another three minutes covers your company's track record and successes. The last five minutes can go to interacting with the buyer to learn more about opportunities and decide whether and how you will follow up.

While the Q&A session is more free form, prepare for that ahead of time by writing down questions you want to ask. Make sure to dress appropriately and have the right team. Each business can have a maximum of two people attend. You want the right person or people there to help answer questions if any buyers have them.

Before arriving at the Business Matchmaking event, you should have documents to leave behind with the prospects. These include a plentiful supply of business cards, which you will use not only for giving your contact information to prospects, but for networking with prospective team members

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and other people at the event. You should, at minimum, have a one-page brief summarizing the main points of your presentation which can be left with each person you meet with in a formal matchmaking session.

Cancel other commitments the day of the Business Matchmaking event and avoid allowing anything to come up that will distract you. Business Matchmaking programs offer useful seminars and networking events in addition to face-to-face selling sessions. In between your face-to-face appointments (which can average 5-10 for the day) small businesses have an opportunity to meet with representatives of sponsoring corporations and support groups like SCORE, the SBDCs and others.

These can often provide unique commercial benefits as value-adds to Business Matchmaking participation. For example, at the Southeastern Regional Business Matchmaking pro-

gram, held on April 17th in Atlanta, Federal Express introduced a major discount program covering FedEx and Kinko’s for attending small businesses.

There are always some last-minute changes and small businesses often have an opportunity to add new appointments beyond their original schedule. Part of being prepared is having the time available to take advantage of unexpected opportunities.

Also prepare to document your attendance. Collect information from buyers and other businesses in attendance, and consider bringing along a small camera to collect pictures of you or your representative with buyers and other atten-

dees. The pictures can help decorate your web site and convey the impression that you are a company to be reckoned with because people from large agencies and companies have taken the time to meet with you.

Another way to get ready for Business Matchmaking is to open your mind to the possibility of partnering with other businesses. Many small businesses that sell to the government don’t deal directly with government buyers. Instead, they are subcontractors to large companies that are prime contractors to the government. If you are willing and able to partner with such a prime contractor, your opportunities at Business Matchmaking events will expand dramatically.

Finally, have in advance a plan for following up. Generally, you should engage in regular monthly or more frequent contact with any buyer you meet from a company that seems like a good prospect

for three to six months after the Business Matchmaking event. Most Business Matchmaking meetings don’t result in immediate contracts. It takes time to develop the relationship and figure out the buying process.

Clearly, just getting ready for a Business Matchmaking event can take considerable time. And there is more to learn. The Business Matchmaking web site (www.businessmatchmaking.com) offers an important tutorial as training for its regional events and its online services. Homework can pay off. The 2007 schedule of official regional Business Matchmaking events include Atlanta (April), Chicago (August), Dallas (October) and Little Rock (December). In between those events are several smaller procurement opportunities offered by government agencies and corporations.

Don Stoneham’s experience selling to government and prime contractors started with regional California agencies at the Oakland Business Matchmaking event. After attending two such events, he’s now on a waiting list to become part of a \$45-billion Department of Homeland Security project, and has additional opportunities. Stoneham credits his success to learning what he did wrong in the beginning, and correcting it. He resolved to be better prepared before he went to another event.

That summer, Stoneham attended the Business Matchmaking event in Houston. After his meetings, several officials commented on how well prepared Agape Enterprises was for the event. “At the Oakland event in February, I was surprised how little I knew about the match-making process,” Stoneham said. “When I went to Houston in August, the surprised ones were the Fortune 500 and government buyers.” **WB**