



## Getting Started in SBIR/STTR: First Step—Identify a Topic\*

The SBIR/STTR program can seem very overwhelming. Well, let's be frank—the program *is* overwhelming. Eleven different agencies participate, each with several (sometimes even hundreds) of topic areas or open solicitations, all with different closing dates, expectations and procedures. How does a small business even begin the process?

Step one is almost always focused on identifying a topic area. For the purpose of this article, assume you are a small Indiana company who makes a state-of-the-art widget. You founded the company and have successfully commercialized your innovation. Sales are good, but you feel you are ready for a new challenge. You are considering seeking SBIR/STTR funding for seed money for your next big thing. Let's get started...

**See what SBIR/STTR agencies are looking for.** Proposals to SBIR/STTR agencies must be in response to a solicitation or program announcement. Remember your favorite pink Izod shirt from the 80s? You have always wanted to see if your widget would have the same performance if you manufactured it in that pink color. You search open, and even closed solicitations (more on how later), but find no results related to pink widgets. Usually, this means you are out of luck and will need to find funding for this idea some place else. But, sometimes there is an exception, which is discussed later in the article.

**Consider your current business plan.** When you are reviewing SBIR/STTR solicitations, keep your business plan in mind. Find SBIR/STTR solicitations that are parallel with your current business plan. In other words, if you make widgets, avoid responding to solicitations for new medical devices. In most cases, your company and your team will not offer enough relevant experience to impress the reviewers. Chase the growth and development of your business, not free federal money.

**Take your current business model and think outside of the box.** How could you take what you already do and apply it in an innovative way? Using keyword searches (more on that later, too) you stumble across a solicitation for a widget used in a hospital setting. Granted, you are not a manufacturer of medical devices. But, you are a knowledgeable and experienced widget manufacturer who loves to watch E.R. With further research, you determine this might be a match for your company. You would need to add some medical professionals to your team and align yourself with consultants in the medical devices industry, but this has real potential. It is consistent with your current model (widgets), it pushes your company outside the box (medical widgets), and the final tip, it is something you are interested in.

**Pick a solicitation that interests you.** Remember, if you win an SBIR/STTR, you are expected to actually do the work associated with your proposal. If you love widgets, but feel faint every time you see a rat, avoid developing a widget that is used solely in rat colonies. On the other hand, take your passion for the widget and add in the six seasons you have watched E.R. (even though you are longing for the return of Trapper John, M.D.), and embark on a look at a widget used in the hospital setting. While sometimes feasibility is tested and the results don't work out as planned, the government does not look favorably on projects failing because the Principle Investigator forgot that he hates rats.

There are two primary sources to conduct topic searches. Both [www.sbirworld.com](http://www.sbirworld.com) and [www.zyn.com/sbir/](http://www.zyn.com/sbir/) allow the user to search open and closed solicitations using keywords. A quick test of these sites will demonstrate that in order to conduct a thorough search, it is often necessary to use both sites (they will often generate slightly different results).

Through a process of trial and error, use several combinations of keywords and change the search parameters to get the best results. Using the word "software" a search on [www.zyn.com/sbir/](http://www.zyn.com/sbir/) returned 121 open solicitations. The same search on [www.sbirworld.com](http://www.sbirworld.com) returned 130 open solicitations. Refining the search narrowed the field. Using "educational software" brought the results on [www.zyn.com/sbir/](http://www.zyn.com/sbir/) down to eight and [www.sbirworld.com](http://www.sbirworld.com) results down to 12.

Once you have your search results, review the brief descriptions and follow the links to any that sound like even a potential match. The link will provide a summary of the solicitation, and if you need more information, follow the link to the full announcement. Use the information provided in the solicitation to contact the program manager for your research area. Discuss your project with him or her to ensure it is a match. This personal contact will also qualify as official "schmoozing," a necessity in the SBIR/STTR program.

#### **Can't find a solicitation that matches your innovation?**

Search closed solicitations for a clue if a topic relevant to your project has ever been offered. If so, contact the program officer and inquire about the probability of the topic repeating. Some topics appear only once, but others may repeat. Ask the program manager how the response was to the initial release, and tell them about what you are working on. Some agencies do issue investigator-initiated topics. Even if it doesn't sound promising, keep checking back!

\*This article originally appeared in the IS4 Newsletter, a publication created in partnership with Performance Project Management ([www.performancepm.com](http://www.performancepm.com)).