

A Hidden Treasure

Government Resources For Your Business

Rick Norment

At the next meeting of your association's marketing committee, notice what happens. The rate of taking notes increases dramatically when the market analysis and international trade trends reports begin. Even with the handouts to match the overhead projections of numbers, the audience's pace is furious. This is vital, apparently hard-to-come-by information, and no one wants to miss out. Almost all of the information comes from one source, yet the data offered is only one small dip from an enormous treasure chest - the U.S. government.

Washington is the best source of information about your major markets and their economic trends. Buried in the files of federal agencies is the data with which you can determine if your customers are in an expanding potential market, or one suffering from the onslaught of an import invasion. You can even gain a sense of the long range prospects for your customer markets, all from government information resources. There is also a wealth of programs to assist your company in market development, research and development, or manufacturing technology improvements.

Confidence in the federal government erodes with each new public opinion poll. While an understandable reaction to the less-than-favorable press reports about events in Washington, this is also unfortunate, since it tends to mask the fact that your government is a veritable treasure trove of valuable assistance.

One reason for this phenomenon is that government is not good at marketing. While the talent within various departments can be impressive, government program directors lack profit incentive or competition pressures and, as a result, are unfamiliar with how to promote participation in what really may be an excellent opportunity for business.

Another problem is the lack of a central clearinghouse. The government programs and information that can be of value to business are scattered throughout a variety of federal departments, agencies, and bureaus. For instance, programs to assist companies in their export efforts are found in 17 different government branches. The private sector has to ferret out these programs and resources, interpreting what it finds and putting it to work.

This process already has been highly developed by



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Fortune 500 companies, some associations, and many of our foreign competitors. Often Japanese businessmen outnumber their American counterparts visiting the Department of Commerce.

What are they looking for? Information, resources, and programs that can give businesses an "extra edge" in today's competitive market. It may be information about market trends - either U.S. or foreign. It may be information on how to be listed as a preferred supplier to a particular federal procurement agency. Or it may be public domain information about technologies developed at government expense or assistance in finding a qualified manufacturers representative overseas. It could be assistance in financing improvements to their plants. There are even travel funds available for potential foreign customers.

Sorting Out The Options

As noted, by nature the government is not good at

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packaging and marketing what it has in the way of services or resources for business. For example, the U.S. government is a remarkable source of market information, both domestic and international. While everyone agrees the data is far from perfect, it is still generally

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viewed as the best available anywhere. The trick is making sense out of how the data is maintained. With little understanding of the day-to-day operations of your business, the government keeps the information in a format that is convenient for its purposes, not yours. Businesses may have to interpret or even translate the information, but it still has enormous value in the process of making business planning decisions.

Remember that a significant part of all market statistics come from the federal government. Associations use this same data for summary presentations at many of their marketing council meetings. Expensive published reports have been generated solely from the same government data to which you have access, but you have the advantage of selecting the information most suited to you.

Maybe you are not a numbers person and prefer to get a "personal feel" for the market. Each of your customer markets has assigned to it an "industry specialist," usually in the Dept. of Commerce. That person can be a valuable observer for you, noting important trends and recent developments that can effect your company. A monthly phone call can help you keep your finger on the pulse of your markets.

Besides the Numbers, What Else?

The options are too many to list here, but here are a few examples:

•Following the example of the private sector, the government procurement

agencies are moving to a smaller, more select list of suppliers. Contact these agencies and find out how to be designated as a qualified contractor. This designation can also have a ripple effect on current and potential customers, both in and out of government.

•The U.S. & Foreign Commercial Service of the Commerce Dept. will circulate your catalogue to potential foreign customers, help you find a foreign sales agent, and even assist in identifying customers for you.

•Under one Department of Commerce program, funding is available for groups of companies to open overseas offices (with the appropriate anti-trust exemptions for their operations).

•Other federal agencies can help you with the financing of export sales.

•Any federal agency with a research facility may be willing to sell you the results of its research and development programs. Remember, there are over 200 government labs which for years have been the principal sites for some very well-funded basic research. With Congress now eager to promote industrial competitiveness, these federal labs are eager to work with the private sector to provide cost-effective transfer of these new technologies.

•The shortage of skilled labor has finally come to the attention of the federal establishment. Many agencies, but particularly the Department of Labor, have programs to address the training

needs of your employees. While it is more difficult for an individual company to get this support, local groups of companies (through their existing associations or ones created for this purpose) can obtain substantial funding for these activities.

Finding Your Way Around

The basic problem for American businesspeople is understanding where to start. For someone unfamiliar with the way federal agencies function, this can be a for-

solvers or program directors. Instead, their role is simply to direct you to the people that are.

The Commerce Department is not the only agency with which you should be talking. Business programs are not all neatly housed in what might seem the single, logical agency. For example, if your principal markets relate to farming and the food industry, the Department of Agriculture is another contact you should make. Likewise, if you sell components that end up in

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midable task: the organization chart for a cabinet-level department can be intimidating. For example, a listing of the administrations, agencies, bureaus, and offices just within the Department of Commerce runs for 35 pages! Knowing some key words can often help break through the maze. Words like "liaison" and "small business," that appear in the name of the office in each department will serve as the tour guide or traffic cop for the outsider. At Commerce, it's the Office of Business Liaison; at the White House, it's the Office of Public Liaison.

The key phrase "small business" can mislead people, since it is defined by the federal government as any company with up to 500 employees (and for many industries, higher numbers than that). If you find a pairing of the terms, such as "small business liaison office," it can be of particular help. In each case, the people in these offices are not the problem

weapons systems, talk to the Defense Department.

Once you have a name, title, and phone number, it can be as easy as a phone call. Most of these contacts are eager to help you. The problem is not getting a response from them; it is sorting through the options to discover what will work for you. Obviously, you know your business better than the government connection does, so with a mind open to new ideas, you may find a lot that will surprise you in the way of helpful resources.

The key to tapping the resources of the federal government is in the willingness of the private sector to go after these resources. Government is not structured to come knocking on your door to make an offer, but it is ready to help you. A couple of phone calls, or a visit to your local federal offices may offer you some surprising hidden treasures. ■

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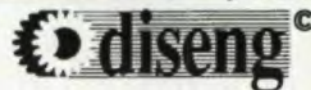
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