



What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

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MRAS: Marketing Research as a Service

In a recent presentation to the federal contracting community, a contracting officer shared this challenge: The contracting office in which he works used to employ over 150 people. Today, 43 people remain, who are tasked with larger spending budget responsibilities and increased pressure to turn around acquisitions quicker, with fewer protests and to conduct smoother contract close-outs. Sounds like an impossible situation.

However, this pressure to do more with less, improve efficiency, reduce costs and meet citizen, constituent or customer needs is driving not just that particular contracting office, but forcing all civilian and defense federal agencies' contracting offices through a perfect storm of opportunity to think outside of the box and devise new procurement solutions, all of which impact contractors selling to the federal government.

One massive striking new process change has already been created, tested and fully implemented and is operating under the radar of most federal contractors, including all large and small businesses. It has a cool new acronym, MRAS, and stands for Marketing Research as a Service.

MRAS: The Creation of One Agency, Used by All Agencies

Marketing Research as a Service, now MRAS (pronounced M-raz) is the brainchild of the General Services Administration (GSA.) This brilliant process was developed to help the government solve many of those problems mentioned earlier including handling larger, ever-expanding budgets and spending requirements, finding competent companies faster, using existing contracting vehicles where possible, and tightening up or reducing protest issues. This magical MRAS is an awesome time saver for all civilian and defense contracting offices because it is created to take the time-consuming responsibility of FAR-mandated market research off of their over-burdened shoulders, and not just totally provide a fully compliant market research process satisfying the socioeconomic research requirements, but automatically incorporating the issues surrounding mandated Best-in-Class contract vehicles usage.

GSA's Freebie Can Cost Contractors

GSA says MRAS is working beautifully and the kicker is, it is done totally at no cost to any federal agency customer. This means those over-worked defense or civilian contracting offices can simply engage GSA to use MRAS and handle all of the Sources Sought and RFI processes, quickly, easily and without cost to any federal office. MRAS will handle all of the market research steps that could normally take hundreds of hours, will shorten the timeline of not just market research, even the entire acquisition process. Civilian and defense contracting personnel that have used MRAS are extolling its benefits with statements like "I'll never have to do market research the old way again" and "The acquisition timeline has been cut in half." MRAS is proving to achieve lofty government goals, but at a cost, so far, hidden to most companies.

Market Research No Longer As Transparent

Normally, one would be able to use SAM.gov to see hundreds if not thousands of publicly posted Sources Sought Notices and Requests for Information (RFIs.) In recent months, if you thought that you are seeing fewer notices posted in SAM.gov, you would be correct. This is because the GSA's MRAS process no longer uses SAM.gov to post the Sources Sought Notices or RFIs publicly where they normally would be visible to all businesses, large and small alike. Instead, the intent of the MRAS is to use the GSA's own contract vehicle, the GSA Schedule and eBuy system to reach out to only those companies already on the GSA Multiple Award Schedule Program with existing contracts offering the specific services or products the government civilian or defense customer needs. This seems to dramatically limit competition to only those companies already on the GSA MAS contract.

MRAS uses AI and Bots

GSA's MRAS has been successful because it uses artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic process automation to handle what used to be tedious market research with a carefully designed AI process to proactively identify companies with targeted capabilities and reach directly out with invitations to respond to specific market research questions through GSA's automatic eBuy system.

Back Story, Pay Attention or Be Left in the Dust

The procurement side of federal contracting had been slower to embrace artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies. Those same challenges government experienced in pivoting to AI in procurement processes can and will leave many vendors, large and small, out of consideration if they are not aware of or know how to embrace these changes.

Dramatic changes fueled by growing federal spending budgets and fewer government contracting professionals are helping just some companies win more contracts, while other contractors are floundering. These changes include the use of data scraping tools and AI in federal procurement affecting not just market research and set-aside acquisition strategy development but also solicitations, source selection, contracts, spending data, contractor performance reports, procurement policies and regulations, contract specifications, correspondence, presentations, debriefings and contract closeouts.

Federal Adoption of AI in Procurement

On the government side of the table, AI tools and personnel commitments are growing exponentially with more than 2,000 government managers from over 300 federal, state, and local agencies, and representatives from industry technology startups, small businesses, and leading research and civic organizations developing government-wide IT modernization initiatives through the evaluation and strategic management of emerging technologies including AI, Robotic Process Automation, Blockchain, and Virtual and Augmented Reality according to the General Services Administration (GSA) Emerging Citizen Technology Office (ECTO)¹.

Key Federal Agency Participation

In AI-related accomplishments, the GSA and the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD) Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) announced on October 27, 2020 five achievements from the one-year partnership with the Centers of Excellence (CoE), housed within GSA's Federal Acquisition Service's Technology Transformation Services (TTS²).

- Designed agile acquisition for AI;
- Unified program management and infrastructure support;
- Enabled environments for Artificial Intelligence (AI)/Machine Learning (ML)/DevSecOps for the Joint Common Foundation;
- Implemented data management procedures; and
- Supported creation of the First Five Consortium².

Market Research Robots

Earlier in the procurement cycle, GSA is using Robotic Process Automation (RPA) to conduct market research on behalf of any federal customer through their Market Research as a Service (MRAS.) The MRAS defines and identifies suppliers and contracts, researches and identifies supplier capabilities, accesses hundreds of existing market reports and provides a market plan including socio-economic status, appropriate contract vehicles, and other recommendations³.

Contractor Action Items

Contractors can become proactive in their positioning by understanding all the databases the government uses to store and more importantly, search or data-scrape contractor information including but not limited to SAM.gov, the SBA's Dynamic Small Business Search, CPARS, DSS, and individual agency-specific databases such as NSA's ARC or HHS's mysbcx.hhs.gov. Even fine-tuning one's own company website and social media presence to reflect the needs of targeted customers is critical in the new AI-focused environment. Identifying specific keywords and phrases exactly matching upcoming requirements and seeding such content in appropriate databases will increase the possibility of being found by the AI tools now in development and use by contracting personnel.

Contractors focused on growth and remaining competitive in the pivoting federal marketplace will be well served to align with intelligent automation techniques such as artificial intelligence and robotic process automation bots to incorporate tactical keywords and phrases in progressive marketing strategies to succeed in 2022 and beyond.

Gloria Larkin is the President of TargetGov where in 2022, the company celebrates 25 years serving the federal contractor marketplace guiding contractors in developing effective strategies and tactics to win billions of dollars in federal contracts through the FAST® Process and the KickStart Program® Visit: <https://www.targetgov.com/> or call 866-579-1346 x325.

Sources:

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3 www.gsa.gov/mras

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