Why Marketing Matters:

Strengthening the Defense Supplier Base Through Better Communication with Industry

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Our 2020 research demonstrated that the **vast majority of DOD suppliers** over the last 20 years, including participants in DOD innovation programs, continue to be **legacy contractors**.

We posited that one reason why the DOD does a poor job of attracting innovative new vendors is its **failure to adequately market its requirements to communities outside of the traditional defense industrial base**.

We aimed to explore that hypothesis in more detail—specifically, we sought to analyze **how the composition and marketing of DOD requirements impacts the military's efforts to attract innovative, nontraditional suppliers.**

Research Criteria

1 **Discoverability:** The extent to which non-traditionals can find relevant DOD opportunities.

2 **Response Time:** The number of days between when an opportunity is posted and when responses are due.

3 **Content:** The extent to which requirements are written in a clear and readable fashion; and the extent to which they contain the information needed for non-traditionals to adequately evaluate them.

4 **Redundancy:** The extent to which multiple DOD / government entities simultaneously seek similar solutions, and how redundancy may affect non-traditionals' ability to prioritize relevant opportunities.

Relevant Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR)

FAR Part 5:
Mandates that information about contract actions >$25K are disseminated through beta.sam.gov

FAR Part 6:
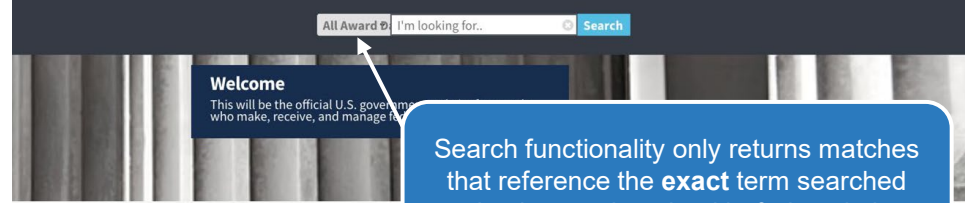Requires government stakeholders to ensure opportunities are marketed competitively
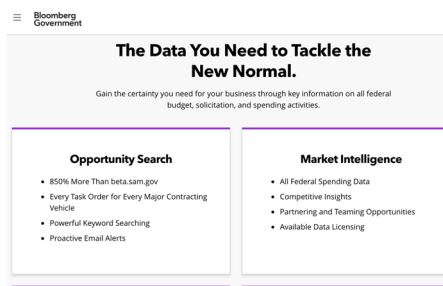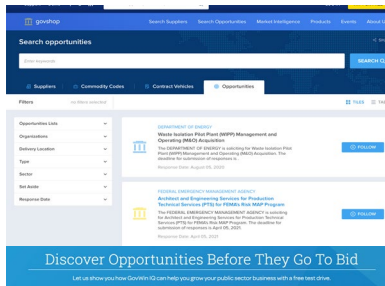
FAR Part 10:
Outlines the steps required during the market research process, to ensure government stakeholders arrive at the "most suitable approach to acquiring, distributing, and supporting supplies and services"

Discoverability

Do non-traditionals know beta.sam.gov exists, and do they know how to navigate the site to search for relevant opportunities?

A secondary market for publicly available government opportunity data suggests that beta.sam.gov fails to serve as a viable resource for this information.

Search functionality only returns matches that reference the **exact** term searched and only searches the title & description.

Site is designed for multiple audiences: "people who make, receive, and manage federal awards"

Discoverability

Recommendations

- Create a supplier-specific website, aggressively market it in places with high exposure to nontraditional audiences, and invest in SEO

- Incorporate related search terms

- Require DOD stakeholders to outline needs in the description field, or enable searches to include attachments

Response Time

To analyze response timeframes, we aggregated the archived solicitation data from beta.sam.gov from 2002-2020, filtered it to isolate solicitations issued by the DOD, and filtered it to include the most recent solicitation listing associated with a solicitation ID and title.

We excluded solicitations that contained no text in the name or the solicitation description, listed a response date prior to the publishing date, or corresponded to notice types for "Sale of Surplus Property," "Modification / Amendment / Cancel," and "Foreign Government Standard," "Award Only" notices, and "Justifications."
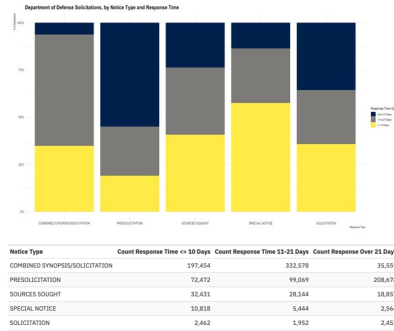
Our resulting data set of total DOD solicitations for analysis was 1,050,933.

To determine the response timeframe for each solicitation, we calculated the number of days between the date the solicitation was published and the date by which a response was due.

Every year, 22% to 35% of all solicitations had a response time of **10 days or less,** and 45% to 87% had a response time of **21 days or less**. Each year in the last decade, 70% or more had a response time of 21 days or less, and with the exception of 2020, at least **30% of all solicitations annually required responses within 10 days**.

Department of Defense Solicitation Response Time by Year

Year	Total Distinct Solicitations	Count Response Time <= 10 Days	Count Response Time 11-21 Days	% Response Time <= 10 Days	% Response Time 11-21 Days	% Response Time <= 21 Days
2002	18,612	4,255	4,487	22.86%	24.11%	46.97%
2003	21,569	4,818	4,994	22.34%	23.15%	45.49%
2004	25,496	5,742	6,289	22.52%	24.67%	47.19%
2005	29,157	6,915	9,734	23.72%	33.38%	57.10%
2006	38,042	9,793	15,905	25.74%	41.81%	67.55%
2007	56,854	14,783	26,043	26.00%	45.81%	71.81%
2008	63,532	15,918	28,197	25.06%	44.38%	69.44%
2009	64,953	19,384	26,445	29.84%	40.71%	70.56%
2010	63,289	19,501	26,483	30.81%	41.84%	72.66%
2011	63,368	18,804	28,692	29.67%	45.28%	74.95%
2012	55,975	16,212	26,666	28.96%	47.64%	76.60%
2013	63,162	18,656	31,058	29.54%	49.17%	78.71%
2014	65,229	22,079	31,486	33.85%	48.27%	82.12%
2015	64,462	22,288	28,515	34.58%	44.24%	78.81%
2016	65,248	23,126	29,963	35.44%	45.92%	81.36%
2017	75,106	25,152	35,897	33.49%	47.80%	81.28%
2018	75,808	26,460	33,793	34.90%	44.58%	79.48%
2019	71,139	23,218	30,287	32.64%	42.57%	75.21%
2020	69,933	18,533	42,253	26.50%	60.42%	86.92%

Department of Defense Solicitations, by Notice Type and Response Time

Notice Type	Count Response Time <= 10 Days	Count Response Time 11-21 Days	Count Response Over 21 Days
COMBINED SYNOPSIS/SOLICITATION	197,454	332,578	35,559
PRESOLICITATION	72,472	99,069	208,678
SOURCES SOUGHT	32,431	28,144	18,857
SPECIAL NOTICE	10,818	5,444	2,564
SOLICITATION	2,462	1,952	2,452

The vast majority of Special Notices and Sources Sought, and nearly half of all Presolicitations, have a turnaround of 21 days or less. **Based on response time alone, suppliers unfamiliar with the DOD's supplier outreach methods are effectively precluded from participating in these critical calls for market research.**

Recommendation: Require notices to be public for 30+ days, unless a justification is provided.

Content: Readability

To evaluate the readability of DOD requirements, we calculated the Flesch-Kinkaid (F-K) scores of the 1,050,933 solicitations in our data set, assessing the text contained in each solicitation description.

We also surveyed 23 nontraditional dual-use companies that are currently participants in the Air Force's Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program to gather their feedback on government solicitations.

The majority of solicitation descriptions analyzed were "Difficult" or "Very Difficult" to read. Nearly 59% of all solicitations require some college-level education, and another nearly 20% of solicitations are suited for individuals that graduated from college. **Fewer than 3% of solicitations are written in plain English.**

Department of Defense Solicitations, Scored by Reading-Ease & Grade Level

Flesch Readability Group	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	Total Solicitations	% of Total Solicitations
DIFFICULT TO READ	COLLEGE	617,516	58.76%
VERY DIFFICULT - READABLE COLLEGE GRADUATES	COLLEGE GRADUATE	209,471	19.93%
FAIRLY DIFFICULT TO READ	10TH TO 12TH GRADE LEVEL	124,176	11.82%
PLAIN ENGLISH - READABLE 13-15	8TH & 9TH GRADE LEVEL	24,111	2.29%
EXTREMELY DIFFICULT - READABLE DOMAIN EXPERTS	DOMAIN EXPERT	23,933	2.28%
EXTREMELY DIFFICULT - READABLE COLLEGE GRADUATES	PROFESSIONAL	18,825	1.79%
FAIRLY EASY TO READ	7TH GRADE LEVEL	17,950	1.71%
EASY TO READ - CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH	6TH GRADE LEVEL	8,440	0.80%
EASY TO READ - READABLE UNDER 11	5TH GRADE LEVEL	3,834	0.36%
UNSCORED	UNSCORED	2,678	0.25%

Supplier Feedback

- "I'm struggling mightily to find the AOIs that say what the DoD really wants."
- I cannot tell from the (Areas of Interest) (AOI) what they are asking"
- "Annoying that I had to comb through attachments to find the AOI's topic."
- "(Broad Agency Announcements) (BAAs) are complex"
- "These BAAs take quite a while to go through and communicate."
- "That was SUPER painful...because of the opacity with which those SAM postings are written. There are a couple -- even AFTER downloading the documents from SAM -- that remain mysterious."

Sample **"Difficult to Read" Solicitation Descriptions**

Content:
Requisite Information

By assessing the features of the data contained in our solicitation data set and reviewing publicly available opportunities on beta.sam.gov, we found that the DOD often **omits critical pieces of information** from opportunity listings altogether.

Specifically, there are **no structured fields** requiring DOD stakeholders to indicate **the value** of an opportunity (estimated or actual) or the **performance period** (estimated or actual).

Recommendations

- Require solicitation descriptions—along with all text on public-facing websites and in DOD collateral—to be written in "Plain English," suitable for an 8th-9th Grade reading level.

- Require descriptions to explicitly state the customer's primary areas of interest.

- Require opportunities to contain estimated or actual contract value and performance period.

Redundancy

To calculate how many DOD solicitations corresponded to UAVs and/or AI, we focused our analysis on a data set of 69,933 solicitations from 2020.

We leveraged the DTIC thesaurus to expand the set of terms we used to describe UAVs and AI, and we algorithmically searched for incidences of these terms in the description, ID, and title for each solicitation. **With this methodology, we identified 42 DOD opportunities in 2020 that corresponded to UAVs and/or AI.**
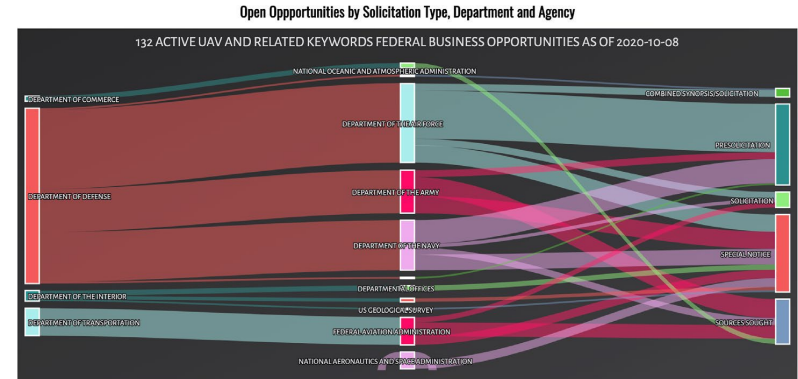
Because the DOD often outlines its needs in attachment data, we next decided to incorporate attachment data for 2020 BAAs and Sources Sought.

We incorporated the text and data contained in attachments for 2,519 BAAs/Sources Sought and utilized Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and other methods of text-extraction to search this data for UAV/AI terms. With this methodology, **we identified an additional 22 DOD UAV/AI opportunities, bringing the total to 64.**

Utilizing OCR and text-extraction on just 3.6% of the solicitation data increased the number of matched opportunities by more than 50%. One can assume that the total number of DOD stakeholders that posited demand for UAV/AI capabilities in 2020 was substantially more than 64.

To explore government-wide demand, we aggregated all open federal opportunities on a single day, including attachment data, and searched for UAV terms across this data set.

132 open opportunities corresponded to UAVs on October 8, 2020

Open Oppportunities by Solicitation Type, Department and Agency

132 ACTIVE UAV AND RELATED KEYWORDS FEDERAL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES AS OF 2020-10-08

Recommendation:
Military stakeholders must coordinate their outreach and communication efforts to maximize exposure of their requirements. For priority verticals, we recommend that DOD stakeholders issue joint requirements in the market research/outreach phases. We suggest that prior to release, the DOD circulate requirements related to priority verticals to designated offices within each service branch.