



TUTORIAL 36

If I Don't Win, Should I Get a Debrief and Try Again?

In this Tutorial we are going to consider a question that comes up often: *"If I don't win, should I get a debrief and try again?"* The Phase I award rate for the Department of Energy's SBIR/STTR program is approximately 20%. This means that a little more than one out of ten Phase I SBIR or STTR proposals submitted to DOE will receive an award. Therefore, there's a good chance that your first proposal won't win. So, when you receive an e-mail from the Department of Energy notifying you that you have not won – should you give up? The answer to that question is simple. "NO, you should not give up even though you may be extremely frustrated with the reviewers comments – but you should not give up.

Proposal writing is a skill and learning what a potential new customer wants is an art. It takes time to learn how to prepare a compelling proposal – so instead of giving up, take every opportunity to learn, what you can do better in the future.

Make sure that the Project Summary/ Abstract does NOT contain any proprietary information.

If you receive a rejection notice from the Department of Energy, it will come via e-mail. The notice will contain information about how you can access the reviewer's comments from the Portfolio Analysis and Management System (PAMS). The first thing you should do is download the reviewer's comments and review them in detail. You will notice that each of the three reviewer's comments are grouped

Reviewer's feedback is grouped under the three main evaluation categories:

1. **Scientific/Technical Approach**
2. **Ability to carry out the project in a cost-effective manner**
3. **Impact**



into the Merit Review categories discussed in Tutorial 7. These include:

- » the Scientific/Technical Approach,
- » the ability to carry out the project in a cost-effective manner and
- » Impact

See if there is a pattern in the reviewer's comments that surfaces weaknesses that need to be addressed. Don't only notice those items with which they found fault, but also those items which they considered to be strengths.

In the case of DOE – receipt of the reviewer's comments constitutes the debrief. Not every Agency provides this level of feedback, and it can be most instructive, although you may not take it that way the first time you experience a proposal rejection. But let's look at what you can learn from the feedback.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

One of the primary evaluation criteria is the **Scientific/Technical Approach**. If the feedback that you receive indicates that the approach was not innovative; that the challenge was not significant; or that you did not make a thorough presentation – what can you do next time? Talk to the topic manager when new topics are released; review the literature; and get feedback early in the development process from your mentors to assure that what you propose is innovative, clearly articulated, and most of all, responsive to the request in the topic description.

The next criterion is the **ability to carry out the project in a cost-effective manner**. Let's assume that the feedback raises questions about the qualifications of the principal investigator or questions about the facilities

or the work plan. What can you do? Spend more time at the outset evaluating how you can strengthen the profile of your team by including consultants, contingent hires, a university, or a Federally Funded Research and Development Center. Take the time before the next cycle to reach out to people in anticipation of the next opportunity to submit a grant application.

The final Merit criterion is "**impact**". If the feedback provided indicates that the anticipated results are unlikely to have significant technical or economic impact; are unlikely to lead to a marketable product or attract other funding – it is likely that you did not spend enough time considering the commercial impact of your work or conversely you considered it but did not provide a clear explanation as to its benefit.

Take the opportunity to learn from every rejection and develop a plan to win the next time around. There is ample evidence that companies

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that write more proposals, win more awards – but only if they also learn from the feedback provided. Another strategy that applicants use – is to take what they learned from the DOE submission process and apply that to an SBIR/STTR solicitation from another agency with similar topics. However, in using this strategy it is important to realize that every agency is a unique customer with different guidelines for proposal preparation.

Continue to learn the art of proposal writing and look for opportunities to conduct future research and development through the SBIR/ STTR programs.