

Montana Technology Innovation Partnership (MTIP) provides individualized assistance to tech-based companies in Montana that want to apply to the federal Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) funding programs. As funds allow, MTIP may also be able to provide assistance to applicants to other funding opportunities, including the Montana Board of Research and Commercialization Technology (MBRCT). All of these applications require a well-prepared, highly competitive proposal. This TECH TALK™ GUIDE discusses in general how applicants can prepare better proposals and increase their chances of success.

Preparing to Begin the Proposal

Proposals to programs like SBIR/STTR and MBRCT that can result in awards totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars are typically complex and demanding. As such, it is important to first make sure the program is a good fit for the applicant, and vice versa, the applicant is a good fit for the program. For instance, a company considering application to the SBIR/STTR programs may quickly determine it is eligible to participate in the programs, but is the company willing to make the investment of staff time and effort required to prepare a competitive proposal? The company must also consider whether it is willing to make the internal changes to its operations needed to receive and manage a federal award. For small companies, these questions are not always easily answered.

An ideal first step is for a company to meet with MTIP to learn as much as possible about these programs and the time and effort likely to be required to develop a successful proposal. Assuming the company wants to proceed, the next step is for someone in the company to carefully read through the entire solicitation or call for proposals of the targeted program. This review should include highlighting ALL of the proposal-development requirements, ranging from the determination of eligibility, to the size and style of fonts and margins to be used, to the format of the proposal, to the submission of the proposal, and to the reporting requirements following an award, among many other issues. Only after this overall review is completed can the company's top management make a fully informed decision about whether to commit the company's resources to a proposal.

Taking a Team Approach

Major funding awards are seldom, if ever, made to one-person companies proposing to perform all of the work in a project. Instead, funding agencies want to see a strong team of individuals, each contributing specialized expertise or capabilities to the project. While some of these team members may already be employed by the applicant (e.g., especially the Principal Investigator), it is expected that one or more others will come from a collaborating partner organization, such as a university or another business. In the SBIR/STTR and MBRCT programs, university involvement is particularly favored, largely because their participation is a strong sign that the technology being proposed is technically meritorious.

To develop the kind of team funding agencies like to see, the applicant should first lay out the project to be proposed in such a way that easily identifies the specific tasks to be performed, which in turn identifies what specialized expertise or capabilities will be required to perform these tasks. Examining the project in this way has many benefits, not the least of which is that it results in a detailed plan of what the overall purpose of the project is, what specific objectives must be achieved to meet its purpose, what tasks must be performed to achieve each objective, who will perform each of these tasks, and the timeframe for completing the project. This plan will also be useful in making writing assignments of different sections of the proposal to different individuals. This plan is well worth the time and effort to complete, not only because it will be required in the proposal, but also because it is the heart of the proposal on which everything else is based, including the budget.

Establishing a Timeframe for Preparing the Proposal

Applicants who have never prepared a formal funding proposal, or have prepared only a few of them, will benefit significantly by laying out a timeframe for the proposal-development process. This effort should be relatively easy, because it begins with the due date of the proposal and works backwards.

Specifically, once the due date is known, MTIP strongly recommends setting the electronic submission date at least two days before the due date to allow extra time in the event problems arise during the submission. From the submission date, applicants should move back another two weeks as the date on which the refined proposal draft will be ready. These two weeks should be used to have the draft proposal reviewed at least once by knowledgeable, outside reviewers who will identify ways to improve the proposal. MTIP can provide these reviews free of charge or can identify other resources for them.

Now fall back another two weeks (i.e., one month before submission) as the target date for the initial draft of the full proposal. Over the next two weeks, the proposal “champion” should compare the section responses to the instructions to make sure the response addresses all that is called for in the section. Needed improvements will be made, resulting in a “refined” draft.

The time leading up to the initial full draft will be filled by a variety of activities. First, the applicant should contact the funding agency to discuss the technology to be proposed and learn whether the agency might have any reason for not funding it. Subsequently, the applicant should be approaching other team members to secure their buy-in on the project, either as consultants or subcontractors who will contribute to the project, or possibly as commercial partners who will help the applicant commercialize the finished product or service. And of course, this time should be spent on the research and writing required to develop meaningful responses to each section of the proposal, including the budget.

PROPOSAL-WRITING TIPS

Proposal-Writing Tips

- Portray the funding agency as an investor in your business, *not* as a government pool of money.
- NEVER ASSUME ALL REVIEWERS WILL UNDERSTAND YOUR TECHNICAL JARGON! Go to extra lengths to use less technical language. When technical verbiage is required, insert explanatory language when possible. After longer technical discussions (i.e., several paragraphs), add a paragraph summarizing the discussion in lay terms and relating back to the heading.
- Follow the proposal format precisely, including the exact language of the headings.
- Use subheadings liberally to “guide” the reviewers from point to point through each response.
- After drafting the response to each section, review it against the instructions.
- Use short paragraphs (3-4 sentences), with a lead sentence introducing a new point, followed by 2-3 supporting sentences.
- No conditional language — e.g., “could,” “may,” “might,” “potentially,” “is likely to.” Write positively and confidently, as though you know exactly what is going to happen.
- No “trust me” statements! And minimize the use of acronyms.
- Use charts, tables, and graphics liberally — should present clearly in B&W. Conclude your work plan with a Gantt chart to summarize the project’s objectives, tasks, and timeframe.
- Use active voice in the writing, not passive.
- Final version should be “publication ready”— no typos, misspellings, misnumbering, etc.

Take time to review the full draft proposal against the criteria by which it will be judged.

READY FOR THE NEXT STEP?

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