Winning Your First Federal Contract

A plain-English starter guide for small businesses

The US government buys from small businesses on purpose — through programmes called set-asides that reserve work for smaller firms. Yet most never bid. What stops them usually isn't ability; it's the paperwork. This short guide shows how the process actually works, so it feels far less daunting.

1. Why federal work is worth a look

Federal budgets are large, steady, and paid reliably. Contracts run for a base year with option years, so a single win can mean predictable revenue for several years. And because of set-asides, you're often competing in a much smaller field than the open market.

2. The one thing you must have: SAM.gov + an active UEI

An active registration on SAM.gov, with a Unique Entity ID (UEI), is the federal government's mandatory "passport." Without it, a business legally can't be awarded or paid for a federal contract. The UEI is your unique identifier (it replaced the old DUNS number in 2022). Registration is free, and it must be kept active — renewed each year — or you drop out of eligibility part-way through a bid.

3. How set-asides work

Set-asides reserve certain contracts for specific kinds of small business. Qualifying can put you in a far less crowded field. Common ones include:

- Small business — the broadest category.
- WOSB / EDWOSB — woman-owned small business.
- SDVOSB / VOSB — service-disabled veteran-owned and veteran-owned.
- 8(a) — small disadvantaged business development programme.
- HUBZone — businesses in historically underutilised business zones.

Each has eligibility rules and a certification process. Worth checking which you might qualify for — it can change which contracts are realistically winnable.

4. The five steps to your first bid

Step 1 — Get registered. Set up your SAM.gov registration and UEI (and any certifications you qualify for). This is the gate to everything else.

Step 2 — Find the right opportunity. Opportunities are posted on SAM.gov. Be honest about fit — the goal isn't to bid on everything, it's to bid where you're genuinely competitive.

Step 3 — Read the solicitation properly. Two sections matter most: Section L tells you how to write your proposal, and Section M tells you how they'll score it. Miss an instruction in L and you can be rejected before anyone reads your price.

Step 4 — Build a compliant, competitive bid. Map every requirement to your response (a compliance matrix), write to the government's evaluation language, and price from the labour floor up so your number is defensible.

Step 5 — Submit on time, in the exact format. Federal deadlines are firm and the format rules are strict. Give yourself room — the earlier you start, the better the bid.

5. Common first-timer mistakes

• Missing a single instruction in Section L (instant disqualification).

• Starting too late and running out of time before the deadline.

• Guessing at a clause or a number — a federal offer is certified as true.

• Chasing every opportunity instead of the few you can actually win.

6. Where BidBridge fits in

We do the heavy, fiddly middle — reading the solicitation, building your compliance matrix, drafting the write-ups, and modelling a defensible price — and hand you a near-finished package. You add your price, your references, and your signature, then submit. Fixed fees, agreed up front. We never promise a win (no honest firm can), and we'll tell you plainly when an opportunity isn't worth bidding.

Free, no-obligation fit-check: send us a SAM.gov link and we'll tell you honestly whether it's worth your time — usually within two business days. → **thebidbridge.com**

This guide is general information, not legal, tax, or procurement advice. Rules and eligibility vary by contract and change over time — always confirm current requirements with authoritative sources (SAM.gov, the SBA) or a qualified adviser.