

The Delicate, Necessary Job of Partnering with Vendors

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In 2002, as reports of billions of dollars in homeland defense funding hit the news, companies large and small began to visualize the new and expanded marketing opportunities all that money would provide. Suddenly local governments across the country would replace everything with the latest and greatest, and today's R&D would pay off in a huge way with emergency management budgets at an all time high.

Today, we know that local budgets for homeland security, though higher, have been more modest than expected, prompting some vendors to tone down their efforts to reach out to our nation's first responders. Other vendors, though, seeing the potential of long term involvement, have maintained their commitment to work with state and local governments to understand their needs and develop solutions to their unique vulnerabilities and plans for securing their roadways, information systems, transportation hubs, and communities.

Agencies can receive help from vendors. In fact, in smaller communities where the first responders' infrastructure is leaner, agencies depend on vendors to provide them with help in configuring sophisticated technologies and vetting the practical applications of timely issues like interoperability, intelligent transportation, or even certified compatible personal protective equipment. At the same time, neither the customer nor the vendor want to create a relationship so close that it would preclude the vendor legally from bidding on the very solutions they helped to identify. In other words, it is a delicate, but necessary, job.

Find a partner for the long term

Despite Congress' best efforts, even those grants with a stated timeline (State Homeland Security grants come to mind) have in reality been slow to arrive at the local town hall. Grantseeking can be a 3-4 month proposition, or it may be ongoing for 12-18 months, with pieces of funding coming in at irregular intervals and in odd amounts.

Make sure the vendor you choose to work with is committed to you over the long term. They should recognize that in working with you, they are developing their own value to your agency. Further, their ability to think through your needs and recommend solutions corresponds to how well they know your unique needs and goals.

The vendors should recognize that although they may occasionally lose contracts to lower bidders, the long-term return on their investment in building their relationship with you will go far beyond a single contract for a substitutable commodity. Don't waste your time with vendors that don't understand that important premise.

Make sure the vendor is qualified

Since you will probably work with multiple vendors for different projects, it is important to make certain the ones you choose to work with in an advisory role really know what they're doing, in the specific context of your project, your agency, and your community type. Ask for and follow up on references. Engage in due diligence, to determine what qualifications each potential vendor offers and how they correspond to your needs. Moreover, don't just talk to the vendors that come to you. If there is a best in class vendor who works in an area you have as a priority, don't hesitate to call them.

Vendors should also have case studies that reflect their experience in the areas in which you need their involvement. If it's too early in the process to call a salesperson in, you may want to check out their Web sites for case studies and information on how they package their products and services.

Think Big!

It may be stating the obvious to say that the more likely their involvement is to result in a big contract, the more attention you'll get from vendors. Make no mistake about it; they are sales-driven. Nevertheless, you can increase your partnership appeal by beefing up your project in a couple of ways:

- Take a regional approach to solving a problem. Involving other municipalities in your project not only makes the project (and its corresponding contracts) bigger, but it also makes it more fundable by the many grantmakers that favor regional homeland security approaches.
- Look at the blue sky approach to reaching your goals. Sometimes the more ambitious approach pays additional dividends in functionality and reliability over the long term. Be frugal, but not parsimonious.

- Consider how your project is innovative or could be used as a model for other communities, in terms of the technology used, who funded it, and what outcomes you realized as a result.