THE INSIDER'S PLAYBOOK

How To Win SBIR

The Washington insider's guide to winning federal R&D grants, and to surviving what comes after the money runs out.

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A federal government-relations perspective. Figures current as of April 2026. Edition 1.0.

What's Inside

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How To Read This Guide, And A Promise

There is a great deal of free federal money for small companies doing real research and development. Most companies that go after it lose. This guide is about why, and about the moves that the winners make and the losers never hear about.

I am not a grant writer. I have spent more than fifteen years in Washington as a federal lobbyist, which means my job is understanding how agencies actually think, who really makes decisions, and when a quiet conversation is allowed and when it is forbidden. There are good consultants who will help you write a strong proposal, and there are now plenty of tools that will help you with the words. This guide is about the part none of them teach: the relationships, the timing, and the long game that decides whether your research ever turns into a business.

Here is my promise, and it is the most important sentence in this guide. **I will never tell you that anyone can get you the award.** No one can. The decision is made behind a wall that I am not allowed near, and as you will see, that wall is actually your friend. Everything in here is either a published rule you can verify yourself, or my honest read on how the system works, and I will always tell you which is which. Where I give you a number, it is current as of April 2026, and several of these numbers change every year, so always confirm the live figure before you rely on it.

TWO QUICK DEFINITIONS

SBIR stands for Small Business Innovation Research. **STTR** stands for Small Business Technology Transfer. They are sister programs. The main practical difference is that STTR requires you to partner with a research institution, like a university or a federal lab, and to do a set share of the work there. SBIR does not. Most of what follows applies to both, and I will flag the places where they part ways.

Read it in order the first time. The early chapters build the mental model, the middle chapters are the application game, and the last five chapters are the part almost nobody plans for, which is what happens after you win. That last part is where most companies quietly die, and it is the part I care about most.

PART I · THE LANDSCAPE

1. Why Washington Funds Strangers

Start with the strange fact at the center of all of this. The federal government will give a tiny, unproven company real money to do research, take no ownership in return, and ask for none of it back. That is not how private capital works, and it confuses a lot of founders. Once you understand *why* the government does it, every other decision in this guide gets easier.

Federal agencies that spend a large amount on outside research and development are required by law to set aside a slice of that budget for small businesses. The program has run since 1982. It is coordinated by the Small Business Administration and funded through eleven different agencies, from the Department of Defense to the National Institutes of Health to the National Science Foundation. The money is non-dilutive and equity free, which is the single most attractive feature: you keep your whole company.

> **The set-aside, in law.** Agencies with more than $100 million in outside R&D must reserve 3.2 percent of it for SBIR. Agencies above $1 billion reserve an additional 0.45 percent for STTR. These percentages are written into federal statute, which is why the pool is large and dependable, and also why it is political. More on that in the final chapter.

The size of the prize matters. Across all eleven agencies this is billions of dollars a year. But here is the insight most newcomers miss: it is not one program. It is eleven programs that happen to share a name. Each agency runs it to serve its own mission, and that mission is the key to everything, from which agency you should target to how you should talk to them.

The Three Kinds Of Agency

Over the years a useful way to sort the agencies has emerged, and I want you to keep it in your head every time you read a solicitation.

- **The buyers.** Agencies like the Department of Defense and NASA largely use SBIR to buy specific technology they have already decided they need. Their topics tend to be tightly written and narrow. They are telling you what they want. Your job is to fit it, closely.
- **The portfolio managers.** Agencies like the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy use SBIR to fund a broad portfolio of promising ideas. They give you more room to propose your own direction. Here, fit matters less than ambition and credibility.

- **The mission funders.** Agencies like the National Institutes of Health fund work that advances a broad public goal, in their case health. They publish general areas of interest rather than narrow shopping lists, and they give you real latitude.

Why does this taxonomy matter so much? Because it tells you, before you write a word, how much freedom you have, how closely you must hug the agency's stated need, and, as you will see in Chapter 4, when and whether you are even allowed to pick up the phone and talk to them. A founder who treats the Defense Department like the National Science Foundation will write the wrong proposal to the wrong audience and never understand why they lost.

THE TAKEAWAY

This is free, equity-free money, backed by statute, and it is large. But it is eleven different games. Before you do anything else, decide which kind of agency fits your technology, because that single choice shapes every move that follows.

PART I · THE LANDSCAPE

2. Are You Eligible? The Five-Minute Gate

Before you fall in love with a topic, spend five minutes making sure you can legally play. Eligibility is not complicated, but getting it wrong wastes months, and a few of the rules trip up first-timers in predictable ways.

The Core Rules

- **You must be a small business.** A for-profit company based in the United States, with 500 or fewer employees, counting affiliates.
- **It must be American-owned.** More than 50 percent owned and controlled by United States citizens or permanent residents, or by another qualifying small business. There are specific provisions that allow more ownership by venture and private-equity firms at some agencies, which is a place to check the current rules carefully if that is your situation.
- **Your lead researcher has to be yours.** For SBIR, your principal investigator, the person leading the science, must be primarily employed by your company, meaning more than half their time, at the time of award and during the project. This is the rule that catches academic founders who want to keep one foot on campus. STTR is different and more flexible here, which is one of the main reasons it exists.

STTR's trade. STTR lets your principal investigator sit at the partnering research institution instead of at your company, and it requires that a set share of the work be done by that partner. If your science lives in a university lab and the professor is not leaving, STTR is often the honest path. If you have the team in-house, SBIR gives you more control.

The New Security Screen, And What It Actually Is

The program was reauthorized in 2026, and the new law added a security review that you should understand correctly, because there is a lot of loose talk about it. **It is not a new limit on how much of your company a foreigner can own.** It is a screen that checks applicants and their key people against specific federal risk lists, the kind used to flag ties to certain foreign militaries and sanctioned entities, along with a due-diligence process. An agency can decline an award on those security grounds and has to state the basis. For the vast majority of ordinary American startups this changes nothing. If your company has foreign investors, foreign founders, or overseas research ties, this is a place to get specific, current advice rather than guess.

THE TAKEAWAY

Small, American-owned, with your lead scientist primarily on your payroll. If you clear that, you are in. If your science lives in a university or you have foreign ownership, slow down and check STTR and the security screen specifically before you invest time in a proposal.

PART II · CHOOSING YOUR SHOT

3. Topic Selection Is The Whole Game

Here is the mistake that sinks more first-time applicants than any weakness in their science: they fall in love with their idea, find a topic that is vaguely related, and force the fit. They are answering a question the agency did not ask. The winners do the opposite. They start from what the agency is hungry to fund, and they bring an idea that feeds that hunger exactly.

You do not win SBIR by having a great idea. You win by matching a great idea to a need an agency is already motivated to pay for. The idea and the need both have to be real. Your job in this chapter is to find the overlap.

How Topics Get Written

Agencies publish their needs as topics inside a solicitation, and those topics are written months in advance by real people inside the agency who have a specific problem they are trying to solve. The buyers, like Defense, write narrow topics that read almost like a shopping list. The portfolio managers and mission funders write broader topics that invite you to propose your approach. Reading the type of topic tells you how much room you have.

Reading For The Unstated Need

The skill that separates insiders from outsiders is reading a topic for the priority behind the words. A topic is a compromise document. Someone wanted it funded, someone had to approve the wording, and the real problem is often a layer beneath the literal text. When a topic keeps circling a particular failure mode, or names a constraint twice, that is the agency telling you where the pain actually is. Write to the pain, not just to the paragraph.

A PRACTICAL WORKFLOW

1. List the two or three agencies whose mission your technology genuinely serves.
2. Read their open and forecasted topics, not just the open ones. Forecasted topics give you a head start of weeks or months.
3. Score each topic for fit honestly. A forced fit is a wasted month.
4. For your best fits, identify the topic author or program officer, because Chapter 4 is about what you do next, and the timing window is unforgiving.

The Template Pack at the back includes an **Agency-Fit Chooser** and a **Topic-Tracking Sheet** so you can run this as a repeatable process instead of a scramble every solicitation season.

THE TAKEAWAY

Start from the agency's need, not your idea. Read the topic for the problem underneath the wording. And track forecasted topics, because the head start is free and most of your competition will not bother.

PART II · CHOOSING YOUR SHOT

4. The Pre-Release Call That Wins Awards

This is the most important chapter in the guide, and it describes the single highest-leverage move that newcomers skip and insiders never do. Before you write a word, you talk to the agency.

This is not a trick and it is not a loophole. The program itself encourages it. The government's own guidance is blunt about it: companies that win these awards tend to have open lines of communication with the people at the agency, and you are specifically pointed toward the topic author, the person who wrote the need you are answering. A short, well-run conversation can tell you what the agency has already tried, what they do not want, and what the topic really means, none of which is in the written solicitation.

> **The rule that makes or breaks this move: timing differs by agency, and it is absolute.** You can typically talk to topic authors at the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy, and the National Science Foundation at any time while the solicitation is open. The Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security let you talk to them only during the short pre-release window before the solicitation officially opens. NASA and the Department of Transportation cannot discuss their topics with you at all once the solicitation is open. Miss the window and the door is closed until the next cycle.

Read that box again, because it is the whole chapter. For the buyers like Defense, the conversation that wins the award has to happen in the first few weeks, before most of your competitors have even noticed the topic exists. The founders who win have a calendar that watches for pre-release. The founders who lose find the topic when it opens, by which point the most valuable conversation is already illegal.

How To Run The Call

- **Introduce yourself as a serious newcomer.** You are not asking for a favor. You are a capable company trying to understand whether you can genuinely help with their problem.
- **Ask what they do not want.** The fastest way to learn the real need is to learn the approaches that have already failed or already exist.
- **Listen for the priority behind the topic.** You are gathering intelligence and testing fit, not pitching.
- **Never ask for an edge.** You are not there to influence anything, and you could not even if you tried, as the next chapter explains. You are there to understand. Decisions about your proposal

will not be made on this call, and the topic author does not speak for every reviewer. Treat what you learn as a strong signal, not a guarantee.

> "Take a company, and I'll keep this generic because it happens constantly. A founder has a sensor technology and spots a Defense Department topic that looks like a fit. Most people do one thing: put their head down and write. This founder instead made a call during the pre-release window and got fifteen minutes with the topic author. On that call he learned the agency had already tried the obvious version of his approach, and it had failed, for a reason that was nowhere in the solicitation. He rebuilt his entire proposal around solving that exact failure. He won. The company that wrote a beautiful proposal to the literal words of the topic, and never made the call, lost. Nothing improper happened. He just knew to ask, and he knew the window slams shut the moment the solicitation opens."
>
> PAUL KANITRA

The Template Pack gives you a ready-to-send **Outreach Email** to request the conversation, a **Questions To Ask The Topic Author** script, and an **Agency Contact-Window Cheat Sheet** so you never miss a window again.

THE TAKEAWAY

Talk to the agency before you write, the program encourages it, and the conversation is often what separates the winner from the better-written loser. But the window is different for every agency and it closes hard. Know your agency's rule cold.

PART II · CHOOSING YOUR SHOT

5. The Firewall: What Can And Cannot Be Influenced

I want to draw a bright line, because your money and your reputation depend on understanding it, and because the people who blur it are the people who will get you in trouble.

The award itself is decided by independent expert review. Your proposal is scored by reviewers who weigh its merit behind a firewall built specifically to keep influence out. Different agencies run it differently. The National Science Foundation uses several independent reviewers. The National Institutes of Health uses a genuine two-level process, a panel of scientific peers first and an advisory council second. Conflicts of interest are managed deliberately. The common thread is that the decision is insulated, on purpose.

That means a plain truth: **no one can lobby your award.** Not me, not anyone. And here is the part that should reassure you rather than discourage you. The firewall is exactly what lets a two-person startup beat a giant. If awards could be bought or pressured, you would lose every time to the company with the biggest Washington budget. Because they cannot, the best proposal on the merits has a real chance. The wall protects you.

> "I'll tell you exactly what I can and can't do, because the people who won't are the ones you should worry about. I cannot get you the grant. Nobody can. A panel of independent experts scores your proposal behind a wall I'm not allowed near, and that is a good thing, because it means a two-person startup can beat a giant on the merits. What I can do is everything around that. I can help you read the agency, get you in front of the right people at the moments the rules allow, and most of all, help you turn a finished research project into a real contract, which is where most of these companies quietly die. If anyone tells you they can fix the award itself, walk away. They are either lying or about to get you both in trouble."
>
> PAUL KANITRA

So What Can You Legitimately Influence?

Plenty, and it is all on the right side of the line:

- **Your understanding.** The pre-release conversation from Chapter 4 is intelligence and fit assessment, not influence.

- **Your relationships.** Being known to the agency as a serious, capable company, within the rules, is legitimate and it compounds over years.
- **Your fit.** Choosing the right agency and writing to the real need is entirely in your control.
- **What happens after the award.** This is the big one, and it is where almost all of the legitimate, high-value help lives. The chapters in Part IV are about it.

THE TAKEAWAY

The award is firewalled and that is good for you. Anyone who claims they can influence it is a warning sign. The real, legal leverage is in understanding, relationships, fit, and above all in what comes after the grant.

PART III · WINNING THE AWARD

6. Phase I: Prove Feasibility, Don't Overbuild

The program runs in phases, and understanding the logic of each one keeps you from making the classic mistakes. Phase I is about one thing: proving that your idea is feasible. It is not about building the finished product, and trying to do so is a common way to lose.

Phase I, by the numbers. Roughly six to twelve months of work. As of April 2026, an agency may award up to $323,090 for a Phase I without special approval from the Small Business Administration. Many agencies, especially within Defense, award less than that. Treat the cap as a ceiling, not an expectation, and read each solicitation for its actual figure.

Reviewers are weighing a handful of things: is the innovation real, is it technically feasible, is your team capable of doing it, and is there a credible path to a commercial or mission outcome. Write to those criteria directly. A common and fatal error is writing with passion about why you love your technology while never plainly answering the questions the reviewers are actually scoring.

Where Consultants And Tools Help, And What They Cost

This is the layer where a good proposal consultant or a well-used writing tool genuinely earns its keep. The structure of a strong proposal, the clarity, the compliance with the solicitation's formatting rules, these are learnable and increasingly assisted by software. Use that help. Just understand that it is the commodity layer. Everyone has access to it. It will make your proposal clean and competitive, but it will not, by itself, separate you from the field. The separation comes from the agency fit and the relationships in Part II, and from the commercialization strength that starts to matter in Phase II.

THE TAKEAWAY

Phase I proves feasibility, nothing more. Write to the scoring criteria, not to your passion. Use writing help for the commodity layer, but do not mistake a clean proposal for a winning strategy.

PART III · WINNING THE AWARD

7. Phase II: Scaling The Award

Phase II is where the real research money is, and where a different kind of company starts to win. If Phase I asked whether your idea could work, Phase II asks you to actually develop it.

Phase II, by the numbers. Typically one to two years of work. As of April 2026, an agency may award up to $2,153,927 for a Phase II without special approval from the Small Business Administration. As with Phase I, this is a ceiling, and agencies vary.

Two things are worth knowing here. First, the step from Phase I to Phase II is where a lot of companies fall out. Agencies fund the continuation of promising work, not a fresh start, so your Phase I has to set up your Phase II deliberately. Second, and more important for the rest of this guide, commercialization starts to carry real weight. The agency wants to know not just that the technology works, but that it is going somewhere. The story you tell about where this goes is no longer a footnote. It is part of why you win, and it is the bridge to Part IV.

THE TAKEAWAY

Phase II is the development money, and it rewards continuity from Phase I and a credible commercialization story. Start telling that story now, because the next four chapters are about making it come true.

PART IV · THE PART THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

8. Keeping The Relationship Alive

Most founders treat the award as the finish line. It is the starting line. The relationship you built with your program officer or program manager during the pre-release conversation does not end when the money arrives, and how you handle it over the life of the award quietly decides a lot of your future.

Your program officer is your window into the agency. They are how you learn about follow-on funding, about enhancements to your current award, and, most valuably, about transition opportunities when your research is ready to become something the agency actually uses. A founder who disappears into the lab for a year and only resurfaces when the money is gone has thrown away the most useful asset the award gave them.

How To Be An Awardee They Want To Fund Again

- **Be low maintenance and high signal.** Brief, useful updates at a sensible cadence. Not noise, not silence.
- **Deliver what you said you would.** Nothing builds an agency champion like a company that does the work and reports honestly, including about what is not working.
- **Build the relationship beyond one person.** People rotate. The requirements owners and the people who control budgets are not always your program officer, and the next chapters are about why that matters.

This is still all on the legal side of the line from Chapter 5. You are building a reputation, not buying influence. The Template Pack includes a simple **Champion-Building Cadence** so this becomes a habit rather than an afterthought.

> **THE TAKEAWAY**
> The award gives you a relationship as well as money. Tend it. The agency that already trusts you is the one that funds your next phase and helps you transition.

PART IV · THE PART THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

9. The Valley Of Death

This is the chapter I most wish every founder read before they applied, because it describes the failure that I see again and again, and it is almost always preventable.

Here is the trap. SBIR funds research and development. It does not fund commercialization. When your Phase II ends, the research money simply stops. And a great many companies arrive at that moment with a proven technology, a finished project, and no buyer, no next contract, and no plan. The science worked. The company still dies. The gap between a successful research project and a real, self-sustaining business has a grim and well-earned nickname in this world: the valley of death.

> "Here's the pattern I see over and over. A company wins Phase I, wins Phase II, does genuinely good work, and the technology is real. Then the money ends. The agency that paid for the research has no budget line to actually buy the product, the program office that needed it has moved on, and the founder assumes the next phase just happens because the science worked. It doesn't. Eighteen months later they're out of runway with a proven technology nobody is purchasing. What would have saved them is starting the transition conversation a full year earlier, while Phase II was still live, with the people who own the budget and the requirement, not just the people who owned the research. That isn't proposal work. That's knowing who has to say yes, and getting to them in time."
>
> PAUL KANITRA

Notice the timing in that. The work that gets a company across the valley does not start when the money runs out. It starts a year earlier, while you still have an active award, a live relationship, and the agency's attention. The companies that survive treat transition as something they begin during Phase II, not a panic they manage afterward.

The next two chapters are the two halves of crossing it: the legal authority that makes the crossing possible, and the relationship work that actually makes it happen. The Template Pack includes a **Valley-of-Death Self-Assessment** so you can honestly gauge how close to the edge you are.

THE TAKEAWAY

Winning the grant is not winning. The research money stops, and a proven technology with no buyer is still a dead company. Start the crossing a year before the money ends, while you still have the agency's attention.

PART IV · THE PART THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

10. Phase III And The Sole-Source Authority

There is a tool for crossing the valley that is written into federal law, and it is one of the most underused authorities in all of federal contracting. It is called Phase III, and most founders have never heard of it.

Phase III is commercialization. It is the stage where your technology gets bought and used. The critical thing to understand is that Phase III is not paid for out of the SBIR set-aside. It is funded with other money, agency procurement budgets, operational budgets, or private capital. That is why the research money stopping does not have to be the end. There is a separate, larger pool, and a special rule for reaching it.

> **The authority, in law.** Federal statute (15 U.S.C. 638(r)(4)) directs agencies to issue Phase III awards, including sole-source awards, to the company that developed the technology under its earlier SBIR or STTR work, without further competition, as long as the new work derives from, extends, or completes that earlier effort. The government's implementing policy adds that these awards carry no limit on number, duration, type, or dollar value.

Read that carefully, because it is remarkable. A small company that did the research can be handed a follow-on contract, without competing for it, of essentially any size. That is the legal mechanism that turns a research grant into a real business. It exists specifically to reward the company that took the early risk.

Why It Is So Underused

Because the authority is permission, not action. The law says an agency *may* do this. It does not make the agency do it. Someone has to drive it: identify the right program, line up the buyer, build the case that the work qualifies, and walk it through a contracting process that most founders find baffling. The authority is the open door. Getting the agency to walk through it is work, and it is exactly the kind of work a founder cannot easily do alone.

> **A NEW TOOL WORTH KNOWING, WITH ITS FINE PRINT**
>
> The 2026 reauthorization created a new vehicle aimed straight at this valley, sometimes called a Strategic Breakthrough Award, of up to $30 million. It is promising, but it is heavily gated, and you should not count on it as easy money. It is available only at the largest agencies. It requires that you already won a prior Phase II, that you bring at least 100 percent matching funds from private or other government sources, that you can show a market-validated

solution, and that you finish within roughly four years. As of this writing it is created in law but still being stood up, so treat it as an emerging option to watch, not a sure thing.

The Template Pack includes a **Phase III and Commercialization Plan** template and a **Sole-Source Justification Starter** with the derives-from, extends, completes language agencies look for.

THE TAKEAWAY

Phase III is the legal bridge across the valley: a no-competition, no-cap follow-on for the company that did the work, paid from outside the research budget. The law opens the door. Driving the agency through it is the real job.

PART IV · THE PART THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

11. Getting Your Technology Adopted

The Phase III authority from the last chapter is the legal half of crossing the valley. This chapter is the human half, and it is where founders most often hit the ceiling of what they can do by themselves.

Adoption means getting a real budget to buy your technology. Inside an agency that means finding the program that needs what you built, and getting the people who own the requirement and the money to commit to it. This is not proposal work, and it is not science. It is knowing the building: who the decision-makers actually are beyond your program officer, who controls the relevant budget, who has to sign off, and when in the budget cycle the decision has to be made to land in time.

The People A Founder Usually Cannot See

Your program officer funded your research, but they often do not control the operational budget that would buy your product. The requirements owner who feels the problem, the program manager who runs the relevant program of record, and the appropriations staff who decide what gets funded next year are frequently people a founder has never met and has no natural way to reach. Mapping them and reaching them, at the right moment, is the work that turns Phase III from a legal possibility into a signed contract.

This is the honest edge of do-it-yourself. A capable founder can run the pre-release calls, win Phase I and Phase II, and even draft a Phase III plan. But working the requirements owners and the budget process, at the level and timing that adoption requires, is a different skill set and a different set of relationships. It is the clearest line in this guide between what you can do alone and what a government-relations firm does for a living.

The Template Pack includes a **Stakeholder Map** to help you see who has to say yes.

THE TAKEAWAY

Adoption is relationship and timing work aimed at the people who own the budget and the requirement, not the people who funded the research. It is where most founders reach the edge of what they can do alone.

PART IV · THE PART THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

12. Protecting The Program That Funds You

The final chapter zooms out, because your individual success is not only about your proposal. It is about the size of the pool you are fishing in, and that pool is decided in Washington every single year.

Remember from Chapter 1 that the whole program rests on a set-aside written into law and on a periodic reauthorization. Those are not permanent facts of nature. They are political decisions. The program was just renewed, through September 30, 2031, but it has faced real fights over its existence, its size, and its rules, and it will again. On top of that, the actual amount of money flowing into SBIR each year depends on the research budgets of agencies like the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Energy, all of which are set through the annual appropriations process.

So there is a layer of this that no individual proposal touches: defending the set-aside, protecting and growing the program at reauthorization, and supporting the agency budgets that feed it. A single small company has little voice in that on its own. This is where companies band together, through coalitions and associations, to protect the thing that funds all of them. It is the broadest version of the work in this guide, and it is genuinely a place where representation matters, because the decisions are made by Congress, not by reviewers.

The Template Pack includes a **Policy-Watch Tracker** so you can keep an eye on the reauthorization timeline, the set-aside, and the budget cycle that quietly determine how much money exists for you to win.

THE TAKEAWAY

The size of the prize is a political decision made every year. Your individual success rides on a program that has to be protected and grown, and that protection is a collective effort, usually through coalitions, aimed at Congress rather than at reviewers.

THE TEMPLATE PACK

Ready-To-Use Tools

These are the working documents the guide refers to. Copy them, fill in the brackets, and make them yours. They turn the ideas in this guide into a repeatable process.

1. Topic-Author Outreach Email

Use this to request the pre-release conversation in Chapter 4. Keep it short. Send it inside your agency's contact window.

EMAIL TEMPLATE

Subject: Quick question on Topic [number], from a [your field] small business

Dear [Topic Author or Program Officer name],

I lead [Company], a small [your field] company working on [one plain sentence on what you do]. I am studying Topic [number] in the [solicitation name] and I think we may be able to help with it.

Before I invest in a full proposal, I want to make sure I understand the need correctly. Would you have fifteen minutes in the next week or two for a brief call? I am specifically hoping to understand what approaches you have already seen and what would make a response most useful to you.

I know your time is short, so I will come prepared and keep it tight. Thank you for considering it.

[Name] · [Title] · [Company] · [Phone]

2. Questions To Ask The Topic Author

Bring these to the call. You are gathering intelligence and testing fit, not pitching.

CALL SCRIPT

1. What problem is behind this topic, in your own words?
2. What approaches have you already seen or tried that did not work?
3. What would make a response genuinely useful to you, beyond the written requirements?
4. Are there constraints, environments, or end users that are not spelled out in the topic?
5. Is there anything you wish applicants understood before they wrote to this topic?
6. What does success look like to you a year after an award?

Close: thank them, confirm the timeline, and do not ask for any advantage. Treat what you hear as a strong signal, not a promise.

3. Agency Contact-Window Cheat Sheet

The rule that makes or breaks the move in Chapter 4. Confirm against the current solicitation every time, because agency practices can change.

AGENCY	WHEN YOU CAN TALK TO THE TOPIC AUTHOR
National Institutes of Health	Generally any time while the solicitation is open
Department of Energy	Generally any time while the solicitation is open
National Science Foundation	Generally any time while the solicitation is open
Department of Defense	Only during the pre-release window, before it opens
Department of Homeland Security	Only during the pre-release window, before it opens
NASA	Not once the solicitation is open
Department of Transportation	Not once the solicitation is open

Always verify the current rule in the specific solicitation. This sheet reflects the program's general guidance, not a guarantee for every cycle.

4. Eligibility Quick-Check

FIVE-MINUTE GATE

[ ] For-profit, based in the United States
[ ] 500 or fewer employees, including affiliates
[ ] More than 50 percent owned by US citizens or permanent residents, or a qualifying small business
[ ] Principal investigator primarily employed by the company (SBIR), or partnered with a research institution (STTR)
[ ] If you have foreign ownership or research ties, you have checked the current security-screen rules
All five clear? You are eligible to apply. Any unclear? Get specific advice before investing time.

5. Agency-Fit Chooser And Topic-Tracking Sheet

COLUMN TO KEEP	WHAT TO RECORD
Agency and type	Buyer, portfolio manager, or mission funder (Chapter 1)

Topic number and title	The specific topic you are tracking
Status	Forecasted or open, and the key dates
Contact window	From the cheat sheet above, plus the date it closes
Fit score, 1 to 5	Honest fit. A forced fit is a wasted month.
Next action	For high fits: identify and contact the topic author

6. Phase III And Commercialization Plan

START THIS DURING PHASE II, NOT AFTER

1. The technology, in one plain sentence.
2. Who specifically will buy or use it inside the agency (the program, not just the program officer).
3. The requirements owner and the budget owner for that program.
4. The buying path: is there a Phase III sole-source route, and what budget would fund it?
5. Matching funds or private capital you can bring, if any.
6. The timeline, working backward from the budget cycle so you land in time.
7. The derives-from, extends, completes case: how this work follows directly from your SBIR effort.

7. Stakeholder Map

ROLE	WHO THEY ARE	WHAT THEY DECIDE
Program officer	Funded your research	Follow-on research, introductions
Requirements owner	Feels the operational problem	Whether your tech is needed
Program manager	Runs the program of record	Whether to adopt and fund it
Budget and appropriations staff	Control the money	What gets funded next cycle

8. Policy-Watch Tracker

WHAT TO WATCH	WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU
Reauthorization date (currently Sept 30, 2031)	The program's legal existence
The set-aside percentages	The size of the total pool
Agency R&D budgets (NIH, DoD, NSF, DOE)	How much SBIR money each agency has

Major rule changes at reauthorization	New tools, new limits, new requirements

WHEN YOU'RE READY FOR MORE

Where Lobbyit Comes In

If this guide does its job, it takes you a long way on your own. You can choose the right agency, run the pre-release conversation inside the window, write to the real need, and win Phase I and Phase II. That is the part a capable founder can do, and I wrote this so you could do it.

Then there is the part that this guide can teach you to see but cannot do for you. Crossing the valley of death. Driving a Phase III through an agency that has the authority but no urgency. Reaching the requirements owners and the budget people who decide whether your technology gets adopted, at the moment in the cycle when it has to happen. And, at the broadest level, protecting and growing the program itself through the policy and appropriations process. That is government-relations work, it is what my firm does every day, and it is where the relationships and the timing matter more than any document.

My firm, Lobbyit.com, works across the federal government, and the depth and breadth of our client base gives us access into virtually every agency. If you reach the point where the next move is adoption, transition, a Phase III, or protecting the program that funds your field, that is the conversation to have with us.

THE HONEST BOTTOM LINE

I cannot get you the grant, and neither can anyone else. What I can do is help you turn a finished piece of research into a real, lasting business, which is exactly where most companies in your position quietly fail. If that is the wall you are about to hit, come talk to us.