

## Thoughts on the Navy Gold Coast Small Business Conference

Written by Nick Sanders

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 00:00 -

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As many of you know Apogee Consulting, Inc. attended its first trade show this past week. We exhibited at the Navy/NDIA Gold Coast Small Business conference, a 2-day affair. This article explores our impressions of the conference.

First, thanks to all those who sponsored the conference, who volunteered, who handled logistics, who coordinated the speakers and who made everything work for the participants and exhibitors. We very much appreciate your efforts.

Second, let's talk about the presentations and the speeches.

Oh, wait. We can't do that, because we didn't hear any of them. We were over in the exhibitors' space for the entire two days. To be fair, we could have – and were encouraged to – go have lunch with the participants and listen to the luncheon speakers. We chose not to accept that offer and, instead, to hang out in case anybody wanted to discuss Apogee Consulting, Inc. with us. (We were not the only exhibitors to make that decision.)

When we say above that we were “encouraged” to have lunch and listen to the luncheon speakers, that's a bit of understatement. In fact, the exhibitors' space was closed and the doors were locked and security actively kept people – including the exhibitors – from entering. The only flaw in that cunning plan was the bathrooms. Each bathroom had multiple entrances. For example, the men's room had two doors facing the main hallway. In addition, the men's room had a door that faced the exhibitors' space. So while security had locked the entrance doors and was guarding them with two or sometimes three people, we just went in and out through the bathroom. It was no problem whatsoever. (Don't tell them about the security hole.)

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We were excited to be among the exhibitors, which included large primes (such as Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and AMEC Foster Wheeler) and other small businesses. Most of those small businesses seemed to be in search of primes that would buy their services/products. Some of the small businesses were looking to hook up with Navy folks and maybe grab a small business set-aside award. Some of the exhibitors (like us) were looking to hook up with the other exhibitors and make B2B deals.

Unlike most (if not all) of the other exhibitors, Apogee Consulting, Inc. wasn't there solely to generate sales. We were there to expand brand awareness and to perhaps engage in some discussions about government contract compliance and related matters. And indeed, we had several good interactions. Those interactions may turn into projects or they may not, but they were fun!

We had several discussions with primes and several discussions with others (e.g., DCMA) and they encouraged us to submit Statements of Qualifications and to register in the appropriate databases so that we could get work. After some internal discussion, we don't think that's the right approach for us. We are a very small consultancy and we simply don't have the bandwidth to support a large number of engagements. While it would be nice to be recommended by DCMA, contracting officers and/or primes to their various small business constituencies, we don't have the appetite to support that work. Thus, we'll continue to rely on this blog, word of mouth, and other channels to generate a small number of advisory projects with select clients—projects that we will enjoy performing.

Interestingly (as least to us) we overestimated the interest in government contract compliance by the attendees. We had anticipated about 150 – 200 interactions and we had about 10 – 15 over the course of two days. And in no case did anybody actually ask us any questions about compliance. The closest we got was a question about QuickBooks. In another instance we offered several sites for research purposes and we recommended one or two seminar providers. But that was it. The people who stopped to chat acknowledged the importance of compliance, and they acknowledged their general lack of knowledge in the area, but they couldn't (or wouldn't) engage in any in-depth discussions. There were no questions about cost allowability or direct versus indirect or compliance with Cost Accounting Standards. That surprised us. On the other hand, perhaps people were reluctant to air their dirty laundry in public, preferring rather to research us before engaging us. Which is fine ... but nonetheless it took us by surprise.

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All the other exhibitors had trinkets to give away in order to attract people to their booths. There were many with pens, some with candies, others with mousepads. There was one with branded mini-calculators. Everybody had something. Apogee Consulting, Inc. had knowledge. We were giving away advice and knowledge. That was all we had.

We were giving away knowledge but almost nobody at the conference seemed to want to receive it. Several participants acknowledged the importance of knowledge in this difficult area, and they acknowledged they lacked knowledge in this important area, but nobody – none of the people at the conference – tried to rectify their lack of knowledge by actually asking questions of the people who were the (relative) experts in the area.