

Small Business Certifications: Which One Should You Get?

KEY IDEA: The best certification is the one your customer actually uses to buy what you sell.

Don't start with which certification you can get. Start with who buys what you sell, and how they buy it.

1. WHAT DO YOU SELL? Be specific. Not "IT" — what kind of IT? Not "construction" — what kind?

The specific product or service the government would hire us to provide:

2. WHICH THREE FEDERAL AGENCIES ARE MOST LIKELY TO BUY IT? Two or three good customers is a good start.

#	Target agency	Why it fits what we sell	Do we already know anyone there?
1			☐ Yes ☐ No
2			☐ Yes ☐ No
3			☐ Yes ☐ No

HOW TO LOOK IT UP (free, about an hour)

1. Go to USAspending.gov and search contract awards.
2. Filter to one agency — start with Agency 1 — and the kind of work you do (a keyword or your industry/NAICS code).
3. Open 20–30 awards. On each one, find the set-aside type and put a tally mark below.
4. Repeat for the other agencies when you can. You're looking for a pattern, not writing a research paper.

3. HOW DOES EACH AGENCY BUY IT? One row per agency — they don't all buy the same way. Tally what you see.

Agency	Awards reviewed	Small business	8(a)	SDVOSB / VOSB	WOSB / EDWOSB	HUBZone	Open to all	Most common
1.								
2.								
3.								

4. MAKE THE BUSINESS DECISION Only list a certification if one of your target customers actually uses it.

Certification worth pursuing	Which target agency uses it for our kind of work?	Might we qualify? (Episode 6 covers this)
		☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure
		☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

One action I will take this week:

ONE-HOUR CHALLENGE

Research one target agency today. Don't guess which certification matters. Don't rely on what somebody told you at a seminar. Look at what that customer is actually buying.

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