
Q &A. Should you improve your firm's on-line catalog on the *GSA Advantage!* web site?

Questions we are often asked by executives of professional services firms.

by

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Summary: After winning a GSA Schedule Contract, many professional services firms sabotage their sales efforts by placing a mediocre on-line catalog on GSA's web site.

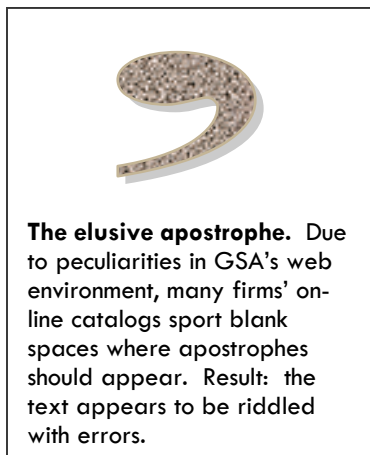
Does your on-line catalog meet your standards of quality and effectiveness? Or might it cause potential federal customers to doubt your firm's professionalism? Improving your on-line catalog can increase the value of your hard-won contract.

Here are a few questions that Lincoln Strategies is often asked.



What is the GSA web site, anyway? Maintained by the federal government, the *GSA Advantage!* web site provides federal staff members with an easy way to find, evaluate, and select GSA contractors for Task Orders.

The web is not a big part of our marketing strategy. Do we have to be on GSA's site? Yes. It's required by your contract. The "real" question: do you have a crisp catalog that persuades prospective customers of the quality of your firm?



The elusive apostrophe. Due to peculiarities in GSA's web environment, many firms' on-line catalogs sport blank spaces where apostrophes should appear. Result: the text appears to be riddled with errors.

Who can see our catalog on GSA's web site? Any federal staff member—in fact, any member of the public—can look at this catalog with a few clicks of a mouse. Your on-line GSA catalog describes your contract, the services you provide, and the prices you charge.

Won't GSA make our on-line catalog look good? No. The quality is your call. The variation is staggering. *GSA Advantage!* features compelling, professional-looking catalogs for some firms; truly terrible, amateurish messes for other firms; and everything in between.

Why should we worry about the quality of our on-line GSA catalog? Selling professional services requires you to instill confidence among your prospective customers. Imagine that you have spent hours convincing a prospective client to issue you a GSA

Task Order, only to have him or her look you up on *GSA Advantage!* and confront typographical and grammatical errors, poor or non-existent navigational tools, and random layout. This can only erode this person's confidence in your firm, especially when he or she can so easily review the qualifications of other firms that provide similar services.

Why do some firms let the on-line catalog look so unprofessional? After winning a GSA contract, some firms delegate this task to IT staff members, with little oversight from marketing leaders in the firm. In some cases, staff members in charge of their firm's on-line GSA catalog do not appreciate the difficulty of making things work in this particular web environment.

What does an effective on-line GSA catalog look like? Compelling on-line GSA catalogs share common traits. These catalogs:

- Load quickly.
- Are easy to find. They contain "GSA-friendly" key words, tuned to the search strategies often employed by federal staff members.
- Contain accurate, up-to-date information.
- Are sales-oriented. They contain calls-to-action, guide the prospective federal customer, and help him or her with the next steps in the purchasing process.

- Instill **confidence** in the firm—a sense that the firm can be trusted with mission-critical tasks.
- Are **designed for the web**, are edited for the web, and have a "voice" that can be understood by federal staff members.
- Emphasize crisp **layouts**, without tedious special effects.
- Provide **navigational** aids, making it easy for the user to find what he or she needs—whether that person is a program manager, contracting specialist, or administrative staff person—each of whom play a role in selecting firms for GSA Task Orders.
- Make it easy for the customer to leave *GSA Advantage!* and hop over to your **corporate web site**—and to return to *GSA Advantage!* at will.



The dreaded red x.
Many on-line catalogs on *GSA Advantage!* do not properly implement graphics.

What are some of the most common problems with on-line catalogs on the *GSA Advantage!* site?

Many on-line catalogs share one or more of the following problems: (1) poorly formatted, endless paragraphs of text, with no typographical interest—a virtual nightmare of random spacing, type sizes, and fonts; (2) pages that are riddled with grammatical and spelling errors; (3) no navigational aids, making users scroll repeatedly to try to find material of interest; (4) a sea of grey—no color or graphics; (5) incomplete or out-of-date information; (6) virtual invisibility to the “search” function on the *GSA Advantage!* web site; and (7) jarringly different look and feel compared to the firm’s corporate web site.

Yes. I want to improve our firm's catalog on the *GSA Advantage!* web site.

An Action Plan

Here are 6 steps you can take to improve your on-line catalog.

- 1. Look at your catalog** just like prospective federal customers do.
- 2. Assess it.** Does it convey the image you want prospective federal customers to see? Can it be found easily when prospective federal customers perform on-line searches? You may want to use a self assessment guide, available free from Lincoln Strategies.
- 3. Compare your catalog** to those of your competitors. How does yours stack up?
- 4. Set a strategic course.** If improvements are needed, decide on a basic strategy—which may include incremental fixes, a basic overhaul, or a total replacement. In most cases, the actual project is not terribly time-consuming or expensive.
- 5. Set a deadline.** Don't put this off for *later*. Your existing on-line catalog, for better or worse, is "speaking" for you *now*.
- 6. Delegate and follow up.** Use an approach that is appropriate for your firm and that you have successfully used for other crucially important sales materials.

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