

From the 1999 Client Survey, we learned that successful firms have a solid understanding of IFI procurement rules. These are easily accessible on-line, and we believed if we could engage IFI specialists in a bulletin board discussion with Canadian companies, we could offer a “virtual mission” that would be of great value to our clients.

Our Virtual Mission was an adaptation of the “On-line Mission,” with the difference that it was on-line only, and the interactive bulletin board was its main feature. Each week for three weeks, we focussed on a different theme: “Avoiding Common Mistakes,” “Bidder’s Rights” and “Transparency and Corruption.” We posted background reading, pre-mission interviews, case studies and bulletin board discussions.

The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank generously contributed the time of their procurement experts to this event, to answer participants’ questions and comments on the bulletin board. We convinced the Banks that this would be a useful pilot project in their efforts to rejuvenate their traditional business seminars. Our in-depth knowledge in this area and experience troubleshooting IFI procurement disputes also helped persuade them to work with us.

We owe many thanks to Doug Holland of the Export Services for Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises Division (TSME), who acted as mission coordinator and relayed instructions to Information Availability (SXIA) on our behalf. TSME was instrumental in adapting the on-line registration forms, and in web-mounting the participant

profiles (including digital photos). The incremental cost of adapting the on-line template was estimated at \$2,000, which we recovered by charging a participation fee of \$75.

Participants were recruited via e-mail, and response was enthusiastic. We limited the number to 30 as we were unsure how to predict the on-line traffic.

The active participation rate was only 30%. However, participants told us they felt their questions were already being raised and were content just to read. This suggests that when discussion is focussed, there will be many common concerns, and we could manage a greater number of participants on the mission.

The event was easy to manage because it was “low-tech.” Clients appreciated that it was quick to download and worked well even on a laptop. While site navigation could be improved, with very few changes, this template could be highly useful in a wide variety of circumstances. We recommend a full dry-run to work out any bugs before going “live.”

Virtual missions can be a cost-effective way of both serving our clients and producing market intelligence. All of the participants told us they would like to see more events of this nature, and thought the value for money ratio was right. The documents prepared for the virtual mission, as well as the bulletin board dialogue, left useful materials that will be easily edited and repackaged in the form of a business guide and set of FAQs on procurement.

# A Successful Virtual Mission



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