Leveraging SBIR.gov award data to inform projects that address community-driven challenges

The Small Business Innovation Research program, coordinated by the Small Business Administration, is a highly competitive program to encourage domestic small businesses to engage in Federal Research/Research and Development (R/R&D) with the potential for commercialization.

The awards that have been made in the SBIR program to companies that address community-driven challenges can be a great source of insight into which types of solutions are highest-priority for the federal government. The award data can also be used to generate a list of companies that might be competitors, partners/collaborators, or resources for your project. Further exploration can give entrepreneurs insight into other types and sources of funding other companies have used to develop their solutions, news articles that highlight features of interest to customers, marketing channels and a variety of other useful information.

As our example for this walk-through, we will assume the role of an entrepreneur who has an innovative solution to address food security in our community. More specifically, our solution addresses food deserts.

First, we will visit the SBIR.gov website and conduct a search for award data.

1. Choose “award data” from the “reports” pulldown menu at the top of the page.
   a. We can use the filters on the left-hand side to target our search. Or we can do a keyword search.
2. Type “food desert” into the keyword search box and hit “search.”
   a. As of the date of this walkthrough (11/10/21), there are SEVEN awards with this phrase.
3. Review each of the awards. Each listing provides the program (SBIR/STTR), the phase (I/II), the year and the agency. The project abstract and the SBC (small business concern) are also provided. Thorough review of these awards should give you insight into the types of solutions that the federal government considers high priority. The abstracts of the awarded projects also illustrate how other companies were able to successfully “pitch” their solutions to the federal government.
4. We will dive deeper into one of the recent awards for our walkthrough.

Producer Led Virtual Food Hub Pilot Project

*SBC: Food4All Incorporated  Topic: 86*

Consolidation of production and distribution of food has had serious economic and health-related impacts on rural America. As farms have consolidated and turned to technology to replace human labor rural job opportunities have diminished. As smaller farms leave the area rural restaurants, hospitals and schools are challenged to find sources of local fresh foods which negatively impacts the health ... 

**SBIR  Phase I  2020  Department of Agriculture**

5. Click on the project title to learn more. This opens a new page that gives you the full abstract, plus a number of important details:
   a. The award amount
   b. The award start and end dates
   c. The location of the company
   d. The principal investigator (lead researcher) and the business contact. Note that emails are included.
6. Click on the name of the company. This opens a new page that tells you more about the company, including the number of employees. Usually, this page also gives a link to the company’s website. If it does not, then Google the name of the company.

7. Visit the company’s website and learn about them. Some of the questions you might ask are:
   a. What other funding have they received?
      i. Research those to see if any might align with your project and goals.
   b. How do they market to customers?
      i. Will your marketing be similar, or are you aiming for a different target?
   c. If they have news stories, note which publications have highlighted the company.
      i. Make sure these are on your list for press releases from your company.
   d. How big are they? When did they start business?
      i. Are they at a similar stage as your company? If they are substantially more established, do more research to see how they started and grew.
   e. Do they offer products or services compatible with what you are proposing, or would you consider them to be a competitor?
      i. Not every company is a competitor, and even competitors may have partners that can be leveraged by multiple companies (for example, municipal governments or foundations).
   f. Are there people with the company with whom you might share an interest or vision?
      i. If the company is substantially more established, you might consider whether one or more of the founders might be interested in mentoring newer entrepreneurs in the space.
   g. Is someone from the company presenting at an upcoming conference? Which conferences do they attend?
      i. Make sure these conferences are on your calendar. If you cannot attend, see if videos of past sessions are available on the internet.

This walkthrough should give you some ideas of how you can leverage the SBIR.gov award data to learn more about the other companies that are developing solutions to similar community-driven challenges.

Enjoy learning!