

One for the Troops

Could the military be knocking at your door--your business's door, that is?

By James Park

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Vic Henry and his son, Ben, knew nothing about military contracts when Air Force instructors approached them about their Pak-Lite flashlights. Ben, 21, had invented the ultralightweight flashlights when he was just 15 as a tool for hikers, and Vic, 56, had never thought about selling them to the military. But after an Air Force instructor discovered the Pak-Lite at a sporting goods trade show in 2002, Vic and Ben started receiving calls from interested military buyers. "It just kind of blossomed from there," says Vic. In 2007, a good share of Pak-Lite Co.'s \$700,000 in [sales](#) came from military contracts.

If you're not lucky enough to have military buyers calling you, how do you get to this lucrative market? The first step is getting to know your customer, says Bill Loftus, managing director of mission services at Accenture. Finding out if there's a need for your product--and in which branch of the military--is essential. "It has to be something that solves a problem they have," says Loftus.

Vic recommends finding a base with military instructors and providing them with product samples. Local base procurement officers and Small Business Development Centers are also good places to start. Amos Otis, CEO of SoBran, a government contractor, advises searching [online](#) for resources and having someone with military contract experience help you with proposals to government buyers. Also check out sites such as [defenseink.mil](#), [dhs.gov](#), [fedbizopps.gov](#) and [score.org](#).

Buyers look not only at the effectiveness of the product, says Loftus, but also at your business's ability to handle the volume of work--meaning you need the manufacturing capabilities and financial backing to be able to supply the military at a moment's notice. It may seem daunting, but don't be afraid to place a bid on military contracts. Says Otis, "Just be damn sure you're capable of handling the job."