

IN MY OPINION

by Michael Asner

Come on Conrad – don't leave it all to *Summit!*

What do the *Globe & Mail* and *National Post* have in common? Neither provides significant coverage of public sector procurement – a sector worth \$100 billion a year in Canada.

While reviewing both of our national daily papers one recent weekend, I was once again dismayed at the lack of any real news about public sector procurement. Yes, to be fair, both the *Globe* and the *National Post* have run stories in the past on government contract topics. However, it seems that when it comes to public sector procurement, the business press, especially these two dailies, choose stories that can be characterized only as scandal sheet fodder. Rather than thorough, in-depth analysis of the impact of changes in legislation or major contract awards on Canadian business, the focus has tended to be on the simple and the sensational, like:

- a minister awarding a \$500,000 contract to one of his friends;
- a large company taking the government to court about some improper procurement practice and winning;
- a fight erupting between provinces based on trade issues and construction workers protest;
- the Auditor General wondering aloud why so many contracts are awarded without competition.

While there were no juicy scandals reported on this particular weekend, I thought that one of their regular columnists might do a story on some procurement issue or policy. Alas, the columns that I read dealt with anything but procurement. In the *National Post*, I read about “accomplices in the world of e-commerce,” “IBM saves cash with meeting in cyberspace,” and “Telecom giant awaits market payoff from Nortel divestiture.” The *Globe & Mail* wasn't any better. They wrote about “bulk water exports would wash jobs away,” and “Finance runs a leaky ship on purpose.” Any foreign business person reading our press would get the impression that the government contracting segment isn't as important as the recent plethora of vapourware technology mergers and acquisitions. However, the press does appear to give some attention when advertising dollars are spent. I note that the *Globe & Mail* published paid Tender advertisements for two Expressions of Interest, and three Requests For Proposals.

Having found no copy dealing with any government purchasing issues, I turned to the BRIEFING page of the *National Post*, which provides 100-word announcements for happenings

in a variety of markets. Under Entertainment, I learned that “Kermit the frog has a new pond ...” in *Seagram sells Hollywood landmark* and, under E.Commerce, I learned that “Shares of Pets.com Inc ... rolled over” in *Pets.com IPO fails to fetch investor interest*. Still, not one line devoted to public sector procurement news.

It seems to me that the lack of coverage doesn't inform the business community adequately about dealing with the public sector; i.e. regulations, legal matters and how to do business with our federal, provincial and local governments. Government contracting is a large and important source of potential long-term sales revenue for many firms. It is well known that a relatively small number of firms take the lion's share of the government market. Not knowing what's going on means fewer firms become players. Fewer players means less competition and less competition means that some firms are missing out on major money.

There is no shortage of topics dealing with public sector procurement. Look at some of the articles and issues that *Summit* has covered. It has offered news and articles on:

- the exponential growth in credit card payment transaction methods. (For example, the Government of Canada's increased its use of card payments from \$12 to \$355 million in just five years);
- public-private partnerships, the pros and cons of a procurement approach where government and private enterprise share resources, risks and rewards on specific projects;
- how to gather competitive intelligence on your bidding competition;
- the widespread perception that government bends the rules to favour certain bidders, and a look at what courts have done that allows closer scrutiny of the evaluation process;
- rules of thumb for determining or thinking about “fair profit” in government contracting; and
- the Canadian International Trade Tribunal, how it works and what it has done for Canadian companies challenging specific contract awards by their own government.

It is obvious that there is no lack of writers, or interesting copy – only a lack of interest by major media.

In my opinion, both the *Globe & Mail* and the *National Post*, the two major players who are arguably the backbone of our business press, can do better. They neglect public sector procurement, and they have a responsibility to inform our business community about this strange, often confusing market that combines public policy and capitalistic drives for economies and efficiencies.

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