SME Engagement at OUH Trust

One of OUH Trust’s priorities is to improve SME engagement. We understand the benefits that SME suppliers can bring to the Trust in terms of savings delivery, innovative and cost effective products and services but currently have no methodology to identify our SME spend.

We know that we support SMEs through our engagement with NHS Supply Chain (who report that 79% of all their contracts include SMEs as awarded suppliers and that SMEs represent 27% of sales across NHS Supply Chain’s full contract portfolio).

As local sourcing and sustainability issues become increasingly important for the Trust we aim to increase our use of SMEs. We work across hospital sites to help them meet their own local targets around areas such as use of local suppliers. For example, we have established a network of regional and local SMEs delivering locally sourced fresh produce to hospitals and we use a number of SMEs to provide small works in Estates.

The NHS Supply Chain model enables SMEs to gain access to the NHS market. We are continuously looking to improve our engagement with SMEs with the ultimate aim of ‘Championing SMEs to bring innovative and cost effective products and services to the NHS.’

10 tips for SMEs who want to work with the NHS

1. Get the basics right: make the strategic case-Your product is an enabler not a solution; for the NHS, it is one possible piece in a much bigger jigsaw. It is not enough to focus just on the business case for your product (though you must do that). You also need to help any potential champion or customer place it within a wider strategic case for change.

2. Don’t sell your product in isolation. Make the case for how it fits into the Trust’s wider patient safety, cost reduction or IT strategy as appropriate.

3. Your pitch has to address that strategic case, and articulate the benefits to patients, to clinicians and to the system, also acknowledging the implementation challenges. To state the obvious, you need to understand not just the NHS and the challenges it faces, but the specific challenges facing each of your target customers.

4. Making the assertion that your offer will help to meet the objectives set out in NHS England’s influential policy document Five Year Forward View is not going to be good enough. Your pitch needs to be specific and tangible. Immerse yourself in the organisation you want to sell to and make sure you are speaking to their particular ‘pain points’. [See tip 3.]

5. Automating the way things work now is one thing. The real value is to be found in designing solutions for a transformed health and care system.

6. Do not underestimate the number of customer groups within a single organisation. Each specialty, department and ward will have its own set of challenges and their own particular needs. This is where the strategic sale comes in. The trick lies in identifying what the common
problems are across the organisation and the common benefits you can yield. If you sell your product or service into a department without identifying and selling in the strategic system benefits from day one, you will struggle to scale beyond your initial point of entry (e.g. the ward or department).

7. Get the basics right: your value proposition. You need to be able to articulate the value of your offer in clinical, financial and technological terms. Your innovation stands a decent chance of being adopted if you can show:
   - Benefits to patients
   - Positive financial impact
   - Demonstrable impact and the speed by which this impact can be made
   - Credible evidence of where your product has worked elsewhere
   - That you understand and have sought to mitigate risks
   - That you have a commercial model that makes you viable

8. Find the right target for your offering. This advice may seem obvious but some SMEs try to sell generically to every eligible organisation. Geography, digital maturity and other circumstances (e.g. special measures) will have an effect on whether they are ready for the product. It is strongly advised that the market is segmented:
   - Do your research into organisations, their people and their particular challenges and priorities. Read their board papers.
   - Don’t ask how you can help; explain how you can help.
   - Be clear and concise in describing your offer.
   - If you’re starting at square one and looking to enter the market, consider these questions

9. Avoid the following
   - Generic emails which say little more than, ‘We have a great product which will meet your Five Year Forward View demands.’
   - Direct mailers which don’t recognise the specific ‘pain points’ of each organisation.
   - Conversations with national organisations including NHS England and AHSNs suggesting they purchase your product for a cohort e.g. every clinical commissioning group. These organisations do not have this kind of purchasing power.

10. Find the right organisations
    One way to identify your customers is to use freely available open data to profile organisations and segment the market into tiers. This will help to prioritise sales efforts and focus marketing resource on organisations that are most likely to benefit from your value proposition.