Globe Talk: The homeland-security business

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For those in the business of providing security with the government as their principal client, the landscape after Sept. 11, 2001, has been a new world, with sweeping changes not only in what clients want, but also in the competitiveness of the marketplace.

Before the 2001 attacks, government priorities when it came to technology investments focused largely on recovering from natural disasters, protecting government data from hackers and maintaining large-scale computer network systems. Since then, however, priorities have shifted to tackling terrorism, protecting public infrastructure and providing physical security through technologies such as biometrics, digital surveillance, detecting viruses and protecting the Internet.

Yet despite the shift in what the federal government wants from technology, the United States could be better equipped to fight terrorism and provide better security within its own borders with existing technologies, argued Evan Scott, founder of Evan Scott Group International, an executive search group that specializes in representing high-tech companies.

"The technology already exists" to deliver much of what the government is currently trying to do, Scott argued, adding that it would make more sense to make use of the existing tools that private companies both large and small have come up with, rather than trying to develop something entirely new to meet demands.

Take the case of communications or lack thereof, for instance. A large

number of casualties could have been avoided had there been better communication between the police and fire departments when the World Trade Center was struck by airplanes in 2001, Scott said. Moreover, he told United Press International that some casualties that resulted from Hurricane Katrina last autumn might have been prevented had rescuers made better use of satellite telecommunication technology.

Certainly, a great many companies both large and small specialize in technologies that could be used in ensuring safety within U.S. borders and beyond, and as the federal government sets aside more funds to invest in anti-terrorism activities, the industry is booming like never before. More often than not, though, the federal government relies on major military contractors such as General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman to decide the specifics of what products or services should be purchased. So for smaller technology companies, the way to win a contract is not to pitch directly to federal agencies, but rather to promote themselves to the major contractors that have ultimately been tasked with servicing the government's needs.

Such layers of hierarchy may be daunting for some. Still, for companies like Evan Scott, addressing the tricky balance between government agencies wanting to invest more in the fight against terrorism and companies having the products and services to meet those needs and yet not being able to market themselves effectively to maneuver in a bureaucracy becomes a niche business opportunity.

Winning contracts is "about building relationships and having political contacts. It's not just the case of the best technology winning. ... You could have the best product in the world, but it's meaningless" unless a company executive knows how the product might be used in meeting the government's objectives in addition to having a price that could be affordable while being profitable for the company at the same time, Scott said. In addition, companies must be prepared to wait many

months, sometimes even well over a year, before they see their business negotiations bear fruit, given that they are dealing with a bureaucracy that does not reach a final decision easily.

At the same time, Scott stressed the need for successful companies to keep their pulse on Capitol Hill and promote themselves to lawmakers as well, even though most politicians have little or no understanding of high-tech.

"But it's not their job to understand technology," Scott said. Nevertheless, if the legislators are made aware of what technologies are available, they will be better able to tell constituents and bureaucrats that products and services needed to protect the country already do exist. Furthermore, they would be able to insist that those goods actually be purchased and put into use.

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