



The RFP and Creating Proposals that Win.

Years ago, the RFP was a tool used only by large organizations when selecting suppliers. In today's ultra-cautious business environment, even relatively small companies may issue an RFP and expect your firm to submit a formal proposal in response in order to be considered for the assignment.

From the issuing organization's point of view, the RFP is intended to standardize the criteria upon which selection will be made. Developing the questionnaire forces the issuer of the RFP to commit to paper exactly what they are looking for from the supplier. Sometimes the candidates are given the opportunity to present their proposal, but in more and more cases, no presentations are held until the proposal responses have been judged. By using the RFP process to qualify candidates, the thinking goes, the issuer of the RFP saves time and increases the probability that an optimal selection is ultimately made.

Sometimes it works, sometimes not, but there is no question that the use of the RFP when going to market reduces the risks inherent to vendor selection and is here to stay. Few executives today want to explain why, assuming the relationship they have chosen later fails to meet expectations, they chose a given firm without being able to refer to a written document upon which the decision was made.

When it comes to responding to an RFP, companies fall into three categories:

1. Those Who Simply Refuse to Respond

These companies will tell you that "you never win those", that "the process is too political", that "it is a waste of time and a lot of time, at that". Three strikes and they're out.

2. Those Who Respond, Reluctantly.

These companies begin preparing their proposals by spending more time criticizing the RFP questionnaire and process than they do actually preparing their response. They never believe that theirs will win and it rarely, if ever, does.

3. Those Who Respond ... And Win.

These companies either have developed and refined their proposal creation capabilities, or they bring in professional consultants to help them compile and package their response. They always believe that they have a good chance of being selected and they often are.

Why Your Firm Should Always Respond.

If your firm is one that either doesn't respond, or responds reluctantly, you're missing the proverbial boat. An RFP is an opportunity to present your firm's unique advantages as applied to a prospect's specific needs, in detail, to a willing group of executive decision makers. Think of how hard it is to get four or five decision makers to read your company's brochure. With the RFP process, they are now offering to read not only your firm's brochure-type information, but to read and assess your in-depth capabilities, experience and history as it applies to their immediate and specific needs.

By preparing the optimal response to an RFP, even if you lose...you win. Here's why:

- Those executives that reviewed your proposal are now intimately familiar with your firm's background and abilities as related to their specific needs. Should this year's winner prove to disappoint, your firm is infinitely more likely to be their next call than if you didn't respond at all or responded halfheartedly.

- Perhaps your firm wasn't awarded that particular assignment for whatever reason, but due to the quality of your response, the issuing company may want to work with your firm in another area.
- Every time you prepare a formal proposal you get better at it. The first time may be a nightmare, but subsequent proposals are not only easier, but the output is significantly improved.
- Formal proposals force you to memorialize the specific strengths your firm brings to the table. Many times, during the proposal generation process, companies realize things about themselves, both positive and negative, that they may have known intuitively, but never saw in print.

Stop the Whining.

OK, so assuming you've now eliminated the idea of not responding, the next hurdle is to resist the temptation to criticize and complain about the assignment.

"This question is ridiculous", "They don't even know what they're asking for", "What does that mean?", "Look how many typos there are", "There's no way we're gonna' win this", "How can they expect this to be done in nine days?". Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Complaining about the RFP process, demands or content, beyond being a complete waste of time, can cause so much harm to your ability to prepare the optimal response that you might as well have declined to do so. It's like those in school who were forever raising their hand during a test to complain about the question to the teacher who was forever responding by saying, "just read the question and answer it as you feel appropriate".

Preparing the optimal proposal needs to be done gleefully. Here's your chance to showcase your pride and joy to people interested in hearing about what makes your firm special. It's an opportunity to shine. Don't blow it by whining about it.

The Bar is not Nearly as High as You Might Imagine.

Never forget this fact. Let's say that the RFP's issuer sent the questionnaire to ten candidates. Guaranteed that two, three or four of those who receive it will fall into the "We don't respond" category. Another three or four will respond reluctantly and therefore, poorly. Chances are that only two and at the most three of the ten firms given the opportunity to submit a proposal will even be in the running. You don't have to be perfect to win, just better than the other guy.

How to Create Proposals that Win.

First of all, view the RFP as a precious gift, not an unfair burden. The fact that a given organization wants your firm to complete a detailed questionnaire before being given the opportunity to present in person, is in no way an insult to your company's credibility or stature.

The reasons for the use of the RFP process, which have already been touched upon, have nothing to do with you or your firm. Companies issue RFPs for their own reasons. Even industry giants like Dell, IBM, Deloitte & Touche and Lockheed Martin are asked to complete RFP questionnaires. The fact that the RFP is demanding information that you feel is perfunctory, pedestrian or otherwise inappropriate is irrelevant. Either learn to play by the rules of the process, or spend the game sitting in the bleachers.

Here are the guidelines to start you off on your way to winning:

1. Read The RFP From Beginning To End Three Times

Don't skim it. Don't read it only once because at the end of the first reading you'll only feel worse about it than you did before reading it in the first place. After the second read you'll find your confidence has increased significantly and after the third time through, it will begin to feel almost simple.

2. Read Between The Lines.

What it says is just as important as what it doesn't. You can tell an awful lot about what a company is looking for and struggling with by close examination of the questionnaire. Read carefully and those issuing the RFP will tell you how to sell them.

If you see that question #15 seems redundant compared with question #3, chances are that the RFP was developed with input from several people in different positions. You can tell which questions the CFO wanted to be included and which came from the VP of Human Resources or Chief Technology Officer. You can tell whether the CFO is involved or whether the process has been delegated to subordinates.

When you see the issue of, let's say, ongoing reporting and client service meetings come up six times in two questionnaires, and then you learn that the incumbent is headquartered 3,000 miles away, you know what's going on now. And you just learned of a competitor's weakness.

Is price the driving factor or is it quality of service? Certainly both are important, but which one is going to be a deal breaker? After you have finished the third reading of the RFP document, go through and highlight common themes. Then rank them in order of importance. If cost comes up 11 times, chances are that: a) the CFO or VP Finance is going to be involved in the decision to engage, b) that your proposal better provide detailed and highly competitive pricing, and c) that the issuer's industry is likely under pressure to reduce costs by their industry or environment.

3. The RFP/Proposal Process Is All About "Them", Not About "You".

How you are doing is irrelevant. It's about how are they doing. Sure you have to provide some information on your firm's history, capabilities and philosophy, but it should only be presented in the context of how that information applies to the issuer of the RFP.

4. Make Your Firm's Background And Overview Of Capabilities As Brief As Possible.

Devote much more space to how your background and capabilities apply to the issuing organization's needs, which remember, you should have already ranked in order of importance by reading between the lines. When bios of key execs are requested, write them to apply to the issuer's needs – this isn't a resume.

5. Answer The Questions In The Exact Order Presented.

Do not vary. Do not incorporate the answer to question #3 into your response to question #2 and then put "see question #2 where your response to question #3 should be found.

If question #10 seems redundant to the answer to an earlier question, answer it again anyway. Do not put "answered in question #5". Remember, redundancy is a sign that several people contributed to the RFP's development. Whoever wanted question #10 to be included may very well turn to question #10 and not want to read the rest of the document in detail.

By changing the order of your answers, you defeat the issuing organization's objective of standardizing responses upon which the decision will be made. Comparing proposals then becomes difficult, if not impossible and yours will find itself out of the running.

6. Answer The Question

Then provide explanations. For example, if you were to be asked if your firm has an internal quality assurance program, the first word of your answer should be "Yes", assuming of course that you do. After "Yes", you can describe the program and its measurable results, but remember to make the description apply to the issuer's needs.

7. Avoid "Jargon".

The readers of your proposal are not in your business. They may be expert in their own field, but that doesn't mean they are expert in yours. Don't assume that they will read between the lines of your proposal. State everything

plainly and concisely. If they want more technical detail, they will ask for it.

8. Put Detail And/Or Samples, Etc. In An Appendix.

Make sure your proposal “flows”, that is to say that it is easy to read. You want it to be a “page turner” and exhibits within the body impede the reader’s ability to absorb your total message.

9. Don’t Write To A PHD.

You will find that the more senior an executive, the more educated, the more specialized, the simpler you need to be if you want to be understood. Someone with a doctorate in biochemistry probably knows less about other industries than someone with only an undergraduate degree. People with highly specialized credentials are consumed with their work and generally less well versed in other topics.

10. Neatness And Organization Count.

Organize and design your proposal so it is easy to both read and refer back to. Never forget to include page numbers, section headings and footnotes, if appropriate. Source all statistics. If you do not have the internal capability to design the proposal, bring in someone who does. Restate the question given in the RFP. If the RFP’s question is numbered 3.2.1., put that number in front of the restated question that precedes your answer.

11. Breathe. Walk Away. Get Plenty Of Rest. Exercise. Eat.

Set time aside to prepare your proposal response. Never try to respond to an RFP while handling other matters. When you feel frustration coming on, push back from your computer and take deep breaths. If that doesn’t work, take a walk. Then come back to it.

12. During Your Proposal Development Process, Carry A Pad And Pen With You Everywhere You Go.

You never know when your mind will think of a relevant point and you may lose it in the heat of the process.

13. Assign A Specific Team To The Proposal’s Development.

Have everyone follow the rules mentioned herein. Three or four people is the right number. Six is too many. Have one person write and the others provide data, edit and revise.

14. Form Must Follow Function.

Four-color photos should only be included if they support a specific point. Don’t dress it up unnecessarily. Eliminate fluff, puffery and unsubstantiated claims. If your point could be considered “debatable”, get rid of it.

15. Proposals Should Be As Long As They Are Interesting.

Be self-critical. If you are bored reading certain sections, change or shorten them. You are a far more interested reader about your own firm than anyone else. If you’re bored, so is your intended reader. Don’t short-cut topics either. There’s a balance that must be achieved.

16. Do Include A “Conclusion” Section.

This page should do three things:

- a. Recap why your firm is the ideal fit for the assignment.
- b. Be sincerely appreciative that your firm was given the opportunity to respond to the RFP.
- c. Suggest appropriate next steps. Don’t assume that the decision makers will know or agree on how to proceed especially if it’s between two close firms. Recommend what the next step should be.

17. Be Attentive And Follow-Up.

Ask how many copies of your proposal you should provide. Get the contact information on everyone who will be assessing it. Send each follow-up letters asking if there is anything further you can provide. Firms that take these additional steps appear to truly want the account. Showing your firm’s desire and professionalism goes a long way.

18. Win Or Lose, Re-Read Your Submitted Proposal A Week After It Has Been Delivered.

Make notes on it. Have changes made immediately. All proposals can be refined and improved. In many cases your proposal will be industry-specific. If the proposal went to a restaurant/food service company, it becomes your "Restaurant/Food Service Industry" model.

If the next RFP you respond to targets the health care industry, modify the Restaurant/Food Service model to create your "Health Care" model. Once you have created 5-6 "models", you will find that the ones that follow can be developed in a fraction of the time needed to create the first iterations. Your first proposal may very well take weeks of very near full-time work. Your 50th proposal in response to an RFP may take less than a day to get out the door.

19. Don't Forget To Do Your Research On The Issuing Organization And The Related Industry.

Demonstrating your knowledge of the issuer's industry further supports your argument of being the ideal "fit" and possessing the desire to exceed expectations.

Check, please.

It won't be cheap. Especially in the beginning. Expect to devote time and money to the proposal development in-line with the size of the opportunity, not including the potential for referrals from your new satisfied customer and the multiplier effect as executives at one organization move on to new positions.

Expect to spend accordingly. It wouldn't be unreasonable to spend ten or even twenty thousand dollars to win \$400K, would it?

The RFP process is frustrating for you and the issuing organization. When your proposal makes it easier on those assessing it, your firm will be held in high regard and remembered for years to come.

So, there you have it. Now instead of shying away from the RFP process or dreading the moment a questionnaire comes to your desk, embrace it. Ask prospective clients if they plan to issue an RFP. Ask to be included on the list of candidates. Few companies will say "no" to your request to be included in the RFP process and when the questionnaire goes out, there's your chance to shine.

Or, go one step further and offer to help prospective clients create their RFP. Sure it means that you will have to compete, but competition's only scary if you're not up to the task. Besides, customers you win through the RFP process are won more solidly. When you win an account without a formal RFP/proposal, you're vulnerable to the next company when they tell your customer that they should put out an RFP to see "what's out there". If your firm was selected through the RFP process, then your customer already knows "what's out there" and chose you over the alternatives.

Lastly, if you do hire a consultant to help you create your proposal response to an RFP, be very selective. Make sure they've got experience specific to the task at hand. Ask to see proposals that they have created for others . . . that "won". Meet with the writer and make sure that he or she has real depth and experience in your specific field and substantial knowledge of the issuer's industry and issues. In a phrase, "kids should not try this at home".

If winning RFPs still seems a daunting task, it's because it is not an easy one. It is, however, the most effective place to devote resources to achieve your company's growth objectives.

For more information, contact [John Mooers](#) by calling 949-645-8828.