



Richard Bray

# Procurement lessons

## ... for IT vendors and others

**M**AYBE IT'S THE INTERVIEW phase of a procurement and the vendor won't stop telling jokes about the competition. Maybe the bids you're evaluating never really answer the questions. Maybe you'd like to say, "Don't be cute. That's what irritates people, when they're doing evaluations."

Well, that is exactly what Howard Grant of Partnering and Procurement Inc. said recently in Ottawa to information technology vendors eager to sell to government. He didn't pull any punches. A veteran procurement consultant on the public sector side, Grant was talking from long and direct experience.

Everything he had to say was designed to help his audience become better bidders, but by making bidders better, the procurement process gets better. On the public sector 'buy' side, people could spend their time getting the best value, and vendors could get the most for the substantial sums of money they spend bidding. The winner is the taxpayer.

Urging vendors to spend the money on current research, he said, "From the side that we sit on, the number of companies that spend significant dollars bidding pieces of business they can never, ever win is tragic." Turning that advice around, if you want the largest number of qualified vendors to approach you in an intelligent way, then it is probably worth taking the time to make sure that the various industry guides and lists have current, up-to-date information about your needs.

Because the market for information technology goods and services is soft right now, Grant said, a lot of companies are putting in unrealistic bids. Where three or four qualified, good bids would normally be expected, 15 are arriving. Not a good idea.

"Let me talk about what you are doing to an evaluator. You're pissing him off, big time. But I'll tell you what's worse," he said. "A bad bid is harder to evaluate than a good bid, because of the fact you have a debriefing. You have to sit down with someone who loses."

One possible impact of shotgun-style bidding, he said, is that companies that bid carelessly and waste evaluators' time may be ignored for other business, even if they are on a federal Standing Offer or in Ontario's case, Vendor of Record list.

"Do not bid if you cannot win," he said and if a company thinks it has a decent chance, "put a good bid in."

Of course, but some companies can't be helped. Grant told the crowd that some companies have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars responding to RFPs but completely neglected a "mandatory," like a performance bond.

Others make a classic mistake, and submit their bid a minute late. In that case, of course, "There's no discussion on it."

Follow the instructions to the letter, he advised. "If you don't do that, the message to the government is: if they can't follow a simple instruction, then how are they going to be to work with?"

If his advice is heeded, expect more clarification questions. Why not, he asked his audience. "So you'd rather fail than not disclose your strategy? You'd rather get zero points on a criteria or fail a mandatory because you don't want to ask a question? It doesn't make sense."

There could also be relief for tired eyes, because companies will waste fewer words. "Companies give you 50 pages on corporate profile which is worth three percent out of hundred, and when they get to methodologies, they give you three pages which is worth 50 percent. And then they get surprised when they don't score well." Look at the relative weight of the criteria to determine how to respond, he said. "The evaluation criteria is telling you the relevant importance of all the items from the client's point of view."

He urged his audience not to ignore their weaknesses or try to fool evaluators in a bid. Instead, he advised clients, "Tell the client how you are going to mitigate that, and what is one of the critical ways to mitigate a weakness? Find a partner. Find someone who's got that strength." The message on the procurement side, to receive the best possible bids, is to make sure that RFPs encourage creative partnerships.

Maybe the most important message to vendors about government procurement people was, "They're looking to work with normal people, because you know what? The evaluators are normal people who live next door to us, you know. The government people don't live in this closed compound and get let out occasionally."

They are very busy, "So if you irritate them, there are some consequences."

Could you have said it any better yourself? *mw*

*Richard Bray is an Ottawa-based freelance writer specializing in the IT sector. He has been published in magazines and newspapers in Australia, the US and Canada. Before freelancing, he worked as a producer, reporter and senior writer for CBC in Toronto.*

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