



5 techniques

to get

Better Proposal Responses

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by Michel Theriault

Evaluating RFP proposal responses is a critical yet often painful process. You want enough information to evaluate the bidders, yet you get widely varying responses that don't always answer your questions and sometimes don't reflect their true capabilities. This makes it hard to evaluate.

Bidders aren't usually very good at writing about what they do. You get proposals filled with generalities and marketing pitches, text that is difficult to read, narrative that is hard to follow and answers that don't really answer your questions.

You need to evaluate bidders on their ability to deliver the service, not their ability to write a proposal, so make it easy for the bidders to give you what you need to evaluate their capability, not their proposal writing skills.

Here are five things you can do in your RFP to get better proposals from your bidders.

1. Ask clear questions

Don't make the bidders guess about what you want from them with ambiguous or broad questions. Each bidder will interpret it

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differently and provide you with diverse answers that don't match your expectations or makes it hard to evaluate.

Use language that doesn't leave any doubt about what you want. Don't ask for a 'detailed summary,' which leaves too much leeway in the response when you really want to know the steps they take to deliver service or maintain quality. Ask for exactly what you want and spell it out for them.

Don't repeat the same question in different sections. Look at the flow of information and the questions you are asking and make it easy for them to respond and easy for you to follow when evaluating. If you ask questions and the bidders refer you to their answer in another question, you haven't organized the questions effectively.

2. Use fewer, focussed questions

When you invite companies to bid who have been pre-selected by reputation or by an RFQ process, you should know they have the qualifications to provide the services you need.

Your goal is to assess their approach and capabilities in important areas that differentiate the bidders in key areas. Don't ask basic questions that are easy to answer and very general, such as 'describe your approach to...'. Instead, ask specific questions that are key to your own success, such as "when delivering the service, what technology do you use to communicate the status to us on a timely basis?"

3. Separate multi-part questions

Long questions with multiple parts are sometimes not answered fully and the structure of their responses makes it hard to evaluate. Don't make it hard for you to find the information you need. Instead, break them into separate questions.

For instance, don't ask "Describe your approach to reporting, including

formats, distribution, and revisions." Instead, decide what key points about reporting are important to you and ask about them specifically as separate questions or sub-questions. This ensures concise answers that give you the information you need in a consistent structure that makes it easier to evaluate.

4. Ask for evidence

Anyone can tell a good story about what they will do for you in general terms. To evaluate bidders, you need details and specific approaches they will use to meet your needs. You need to know the tools and techniques they use and how well they understand and can adapt to your specific issues and requirements. In your instructions, tell them you are looking for detailed responses that demonstrate how they will provide the services for you and to avoid motherhood statements, theory and marketing material.

Instead of just asking how they will do something in general terms, ask them to describe a specific example of where they have done it, for whom, how long, how they deliver, etc. Where relevant, ask for samples of existing documents, such as the table of contents of an existing quality assurance program, training manual, process document, etc. If it doesn't, ask them to explain how they will develop it. It's easy for a bidder to describe what they will do for you without demonstrating that they have a track record of doing it for others or exactly how they will do it for you. You know they have the capability to do the work – you are trying to differentiate the bidders by assessing the specific approach, tools, techniques and resources they will use to meet your needs.

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5. Tell them why you are asking

Answers to your questions give you information to evaluate and differentiate the best bidder from the others. Even with clear questions, you don't always get what you are looking for. To get a focussed response, make your purpose clear by telling them what you are looking for, either within the question, or as a preface to the question or the section in the RFP.

Since even the most carefully worded question could be interpreted slightly differently by bidders or their focus in responding may vary

widely, by telling them why you are asking the questions and what you are looking for, you are more likely to get the response you need to evaluate their bid. As indicated earlier, ask for evidence to avoid answers that are given simply to tell you what you want to hear.

By implementing these five techniques, it's easier for bidders to respond to your RFPs and it will be easier for you to evaluate the responses and select the bidder who is best suited to your requirements.

Michel Theriault is an independent consultant with experience writing large, successful RFP responses for government procurement and has worked with government organizations to develop RFP specifications, questions, evaluation matrices and performance metrics in addition to training evaluators and evaluating RFP responses for large initiatives. His upcoming book, *Win More Business ... Write Better Proposals*, is directed at service providers to improve the proposals they write for you. Contact him at michel@micheltheriault.ca.

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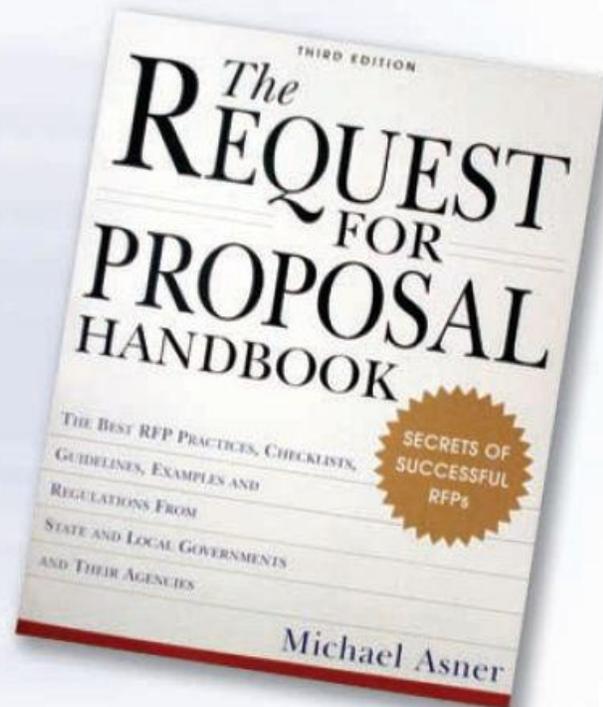
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