

## Dollars and Sense: Examining the RFP Process

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# Dollars and Sense: Examining the RFP Process

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## Abstract

While the Request for Proposal (RFP) is not an activity that all librarians encounter continually, it is an endeavor that all library service groups and companies undertake as an essential part of their ongoing operations. This article summarizes the 2015 Charleston session entitled “Dollars and Sense: Examining the RFP Process” which delved into the RFP process from multiple viewpoints, serving both as a review of the process itself and as an investigation of how the process can generate positive results for all parties involved. The panel consisted of a librarian from a large academic library, a librarian from a medium-sized academic library, a vendor representative, and an individual with considerable consortia experience. The academic librarians reviewed the generic and the institution-specific items that contribute to a successful RFP. The vendor representative discussed how the vendor reviews and crafts a response that fulfills the requirements of the RFP while providing contractual guarantees for themselves. The consortia representative looked at both how they respond to an RFP as well as what they require in an RFP; having a unique perspective of both sending out and receiving RFPs.

## Introduction

There are cases in which the awarding of a contract at the conclusion of the request for proposal (RFP) process hinges solely upon bid price. However, when viewed as a whole, the RFP process can provide many opportunities for advantages that extend beyond mere price points. For example, the process can provide a platform for the review of current practices and planning for future needs. By its very nature, the process opens lines of communication which can foster greater understanding and agreement between libraries and their vendors. Of course, the resulting contract for goods and services provides financial and service assurances for both sides.

In order to realize the full benefits of an RFP, institutions and vendors need to work in concert with each other throughout the process. One useful approach to examine how the parties can best work together is to review the roles and responsibilities over the various stages of the process, which can be divided into five broad component parts:

1. Conception and conceiving
2. Responding
3. Evaluating
4. Awarding and contracting
5. Performance of the contract

Through a review of each stage of the cycle, the panelists explored approaches that would address the challenges and realize opportunities that exist throughout the process.

## Conception and Conceiving

As with many aspects of life, proper preparation is the key to a successful RFP. It is advisable for libraries to begin planning for an RFP well in advance, especially if it has been a few years since a formal process has been completed. This involves both internal and external tasks.

An important first step will be to decide if an RFP is needed at all. The library’s or institution’s purchasing department may be able to indicate if

there are circumstances in which the institution requires an RFP. If input from a purchasing department is not an option or does not seem to apply, a library may consider criteria including size, scope, and cost, as well as the time since the project was last formally bid. The library should also investigate the existence of pre-negotiated contracts at the local or state level that they can “piggyback” on, instead of starting with a brand-new RFP. Additionally, there are certain instances when the goods and services needed are only available through a single provider. In cases where no alternatives exist, the library should strongly consider bypassing the RFP process entirely in favor of formulating a sole source contract with that particular supplier.

Once the library has decided to pursue an RFP, another primary step is to review institutional and, if applicable, state requirements that will apply to the RFP and contracting process. For example, some states require an open bidding process with specific guidelines for posting the RFP. At institutions with less formalized RFP requirements, the librarian may need to develop an appropriate process for the project from the ground up.

The investigation of internal processes and procedures also opens communication with those within the institution who will be working with the library to complete the RFP, such as purchasing departments found at many larger institutions. It is a good practice to make these individuals aware of the library’s upcoming RFP so that they get it onto their schedules. Additionally, this is a good time to review responsibilities and clarify who will be completing tasks such as submitting paperwork, drafting an award letter, and finalizing a contract. Finally, it is important to understand how evaluations are made, and what types of approvals will be needed to proceed with awarding and contracting.

The next step will be to develop a timeline. It is important to manage the project schedule by determining non-negotiable deadlines, establishing the ideal end date, and working backwards from there to determine how long each phase of the project might take. As the RFP

progresses, the timeline should be consulted regularly to ensure that appropriate progress is being made.

Another key task is assembling the right team to work on the RFP. The team will need a charge that indicates whether it will be making the decision, or if it’s just collecting information and making a recommendation for a higher-level administrator. If the team is making the decision, a person with decision-making authority should be included. Others to consider include those close to the work who understand the service being considered, and someone from library or institutional purchasing with strong vendor relation skills. Ultimately, the make-up of the team will depend on the dynamics of the organization and the people involved.

As the team is being formed, the group should solicit input from library staff members closely associated with the products and services. These conversations should include a review of current processes and questions regarding anticipated future needs. If the project is a large, public one, patrons or constituents may need to be queried as well, perhaps via surveys or focus groups. This is also a good time to conduct a thorough scan of the marketplace and to review sample RFPs. Potential vendors may be willing to provide well-written sample RFPs that correspond closely to the service being considered.

During this phase, the library may begin preliminary discussions with potential vendors. Giving vendors prior notice that the library will be issuing an RFP allows them to begin their own internal conversations and scheduling that will improve their ability to issue a timely response. The librarian must remain neutral during these preparatory discussions and structure them as simply notices regarding the expected timing and nature of the upcoming RFPs.

Some institutions proscribe RFP-related communication between potential vendors and individuals tasked with evaluating responses once the RFP has been issued. Regardless of formal institutional policy, librarians need to ensure that any communication between parties during the formal process does not provide advantages to

one bidder over another. Additionally, it is recommended that all parties avoid engaging in activities which might appear to impact neutrality during the RFP process. For example, a librarian might consider turning down an invitation to have coffee with a vendor at a conference if there is not a specific topic to discuss that does not involve the outstanding RFP.

With the preliminary preparation completed, the writing of the RFP can begin. A successful RFP does not need to follow a set format, but most will include many of the following elements:

- Brief summary of the purpose of the RFP and scope of the project
- Approximate dollar value of the contract
- Note about the term of the contract
- Statement about the library or parent organization highlighting unique factors
- Request for proof of financial solvency/strength of the applicant

When writing the RFP, simple, precise language should be used. Language from sample RFPs can be used, particularly for generic sections such as those on when and how to return an RFP. For substantial requirements, though, the library should construct specific questions that will draw out targeted responses about how vendors will meet the library's unique needs. In other cases, an institution might have standard language that must be included. Also, take care to consider the information being requested. In certain cases, it may be better to ask for a summary of certain types of information instead of the information itself. If a library is not sure how it plans to use information it is requesting, it is wise to reconsider requesting it, or to reword the request significantly.

The requirements section is the core of the RFP, where a library describes its needs in detail, and asks vendors to explain how they will meet these needs. Libraries will want to give this section close attention, as responses to it will be used extensively during the evaluation phase. It is recommended that the RFP not be written too broadly or too narrowly. If it is too broad, it is

likely that the library will receive responses from vendors that do not have a chance of getting the contract. If the RFP is written too narrowly, potential acceptable responses might be eliminated.

Many library services have a baseline set of functions that qualified vendors will provide in a fairly uniform way. The RFP might use a checklist or a series of brief yes/no questions to cover these basic questions without overemphasizing them. The library can then focus on asking questions about how vendors can meet its unique needs, and vendors can spend their time and energy detailing how they will meet the library's needs.

Specialty or less common requirements should be detailed in the RFP. Similar to writing a job posting, the library should include "required" as well as "preferred" detail here. Allowing for value-added services, longer terms, or flexible pricing will provide the vendor options to ensure all potential benefits of business with that vendor are listed.

The RFP may conclude with the criteria which will be used to evaluate responses as well as a request for information about costs. The evaluation criteria should be well-constructed and accurate; this will make the appraisal of the responses and eventual awarding of the contract more straightforward.

The RFP package will include a cover letter that might contain a contact for the vendors, statements protecting both parties' confidentiality, a request for references, and submission requirements including a due date and format. The cover letter should also indicate how long proposals should remain valid. If the parent institution permits, it might also include a statement delineating the library's rights regarding selection of a vendor.

Before sending out the RFP, it is helpful to reread the entire package, or have someone with fresh eyes check for mistakes or unclear instructions. The library will need to learn from its home institution whether it may just send the RFP directly to the vendors it has identified, or whether it is required to post public notices. For

larger institutions, distributing the RFP will be handled through the purchasing department.

## Responding

For nonprofit organizations, responding to the RFP is handled by the training team or team leads. Once the RFP has been posted, the team lead gathers all relevant documents and prepares a written response. It is useful to create a central document either on an internal network or a web-based file sharing system where team members can locate key due dates and relevant documents needed in preparing the final response.

In the event that a nonprofit is the issuing agency for the RFP, some time is taken to respond to questions submitted by responders. Use the open question period to clarify all outstanding issues and review the methodology for evaluation if not made previously clear in the RFP process.

The vendor process is similar to the nonprofit organization. The vendor will receive the RFP (or download it from the posted site) and begin to analyze it. The first read will allow the vendor to determine whether it can meet the base needs and if it should proceed with a response. The vendor may have a specific team devoted to responding to RFPs, or it might be assigned to various groups based on the content of the RFP. Preferred or value-added areas may need expertise within the company to ensure response is correct and thorough. Often a specific coordinator will be assigned to monitor the response process.

The response coordinator will pull out important dates, conditions, and any specialty requirements. A calendar will be set up and monitored. The coordinator ensures all areas of the RFP are appropriately answered and the response is sent within the time frame denoted in the RFP. The coordinator also assumes responsibility for ensuring any questions are sent to the library contact specified in the RFP. Required references are reviewed and contacted to ensure availability before inclusion in an RFP. Additionally, the response coordinator will do a final review to ensure consistency, clarity, and completeness of response.

Providing the vendors (via the RFP) a timeline of when the RFP will be awarded and when the contract would take effect also helps in crafting the response. Some RFPs will require specific formats in the return (PDF, MS Word, Excel for specific sections, etc.) or may require a certain number of bound print copies. The vendor appreciates acknowledgement of the returned RFP; this assures the vendor the RFP response was received in a timely manner.

## Evaluating

The evaluation process may differ slightly depending on the type of library. A library with a less formal process may find itself solely responsible for making the final vendor selection. This offers more control and efficiency, but also means that the library is accountable for the final decision and communicating results to the respondents. In larger institutions with more formal processes, the purchasing department may gather the evaluations from the team members and communicate results themselves. The library under a more formal process may be insulated a bit from responsibility for the final decision, but that typically comes at the price of a more complex and sluggish process.

Regardless of whether an institution has a structured or unstructured RFP process, it is essential to provide a careful review of each application. One approach that has proven successful is first to perform a cursory review of each response and record initial impressions. Then, each response should be reviewed again, basing the evaluation strictly upon formal criteria as presented in the RFP. Any disparity between the two reviews should be explored to determine if any material evaluation issues have been found. The initial review can reveal if some responses should be eliminated immediately because they have failed to meet the basic RFP requirements. Also, if the cursory review reveals that some expected vendors are missing from the pool, the library or purchasing department may want to send a follow-up notice to them, especially if they have previously expressed interest.

If during the evaluation phase additional information is needed, requests can be sent to

applicants either directly or through the purchasing department if required. Additionally, if no clear winner emerges from the evaluation process, follow-up meetings can be scheduled with the remaining respondents. Frequently these meetings will provide the vendors a chance to present the factors they feel differentiate their products and services from those of their competitors. The meeting can also provide a forum for the vendor to present their best and final offer (BAFO). To maintain equity, all remaining vendors should receive the same notice regarding what will be discussed and the expected outcomes of the meeting.

### **Awarding and Contracting**

Once a decision has been made, the successful vendor should be contacted, referencing the submitted RFP response, their BAFO, and any other details agreed to in person. The notification of unsuccessful bidders can vary from situation to situation. At times notifications are sent once the successful respondent accepts the award. In other instances, notifications are held until a contract has been signed or once negotiations are well underway. In some cases, local policies and procedures dictate when notices are delivered. Regardless, both the successful and unsuccessful bidders should be notified.

Contracts are also handled differently across different organizations. Some institutions request the vendor to draft a contract that will be reviewed by an institution's general counsel. Other institutions have standard contracting forms which are completed internally with information specific to the current agreement. These "form contracts" are then sent to the vendor for their approval. In either case, the contracts are signed after both parties agree to the terms. Depending on the contract, this process can vary from simple to laborious. Once a contract has been signed, the library should obtain copies of all documents, to be used for ready-reference of specific contract details, in-house training, and as background material for the next RFP. At this point, library staff should be notified and preparations made to accommodate

the new agreement (if necessary). This is also a convenient time to remind library staff of any binding confidentiality agreements.

The award process can be exciting for vendors who are awarded the contract or contemplative for those who are not. Once the contract has been awarded, it is important to communicate objectives, and set clear measurable milestones between the contracting parties. The vendor that has been awarded the contract will ensure that personnel are assigned to manage the new (or renewed) account. An unsuccessful bid is an opportunity to learn and grow. The vendor will contact the library or non-profit RFP agent to review the successful bid and evaluation criteria and learn what was undesirable or incomplete. This helps the vendor grow into a more competitive contender for the next RFP. Libraries should make sure that in all conversations institutional and state requirements are followed.

As a final note, once the process is over, it is useful for both libraries and vendors to evaluate the internal processes used in preparing, responding to, and evaluating an RFP. This will allow these organizations to identify any pitfalls encountered and be better prepared for the next RFP.

### **Performance of the Contract**

Once the RFP is awarded and the vendor begins to service the account, performance should be monitored. If the vendor is not fulfilling the contract, the library will need to consult internal processes to review how to address the situation. Regular communication is critical. Minor issues should be discussed with the vendor promptly. If these or larger issues remain unresolved, it may be time to discuss with the institution's purchasing department the next steps for enforcing, or if necessary, voiding the contract.

The vendor also monitors performance. If an RFP is awarded based on a certain dollar figure, and that number drops significantly over the course of the contract, this may negatively affect the vendor's ability to service the account. Vendors may include a clause in the contract to that effect.

## **Conclusion**

Going through an RFP can be a great deal of work, but in the end the results can be worth it. A carefully conducted RFP process can result in

improved vendor services and pricing, enhanced communication channels, reexamined library processes and plans, and shared agreement regarding financial and service obligations.