

AN RFP PRIMER - PART II



How to Get the Best From IFE Service Providers

by Ann Willis

As a service provider, Spafax receives numerous Requests for Proposals (RFP) of varying depth and complexity—from detailed documents containing extensive back-up information to simple faxed requests for quotes. We have prepared a Ten-Point Plan, focussing on the basic issues facing service providers when answering a RFP and outlining what constitutes best practice by the airlines when conducting the tender.

Following these guidelines will help airlines get the best from the companies to whom they issue their RFP and work toward a smooth and professional experience for all parties involved.

In the same way as commissioning a builder to build a new house, it is important to provide plenty of information and a detailed scope of work and to keep the communication lines open to ensure you get what you want from the project. It's a joint effort!

As Sarah Blomfield of Cathay Pacific made clear in her recent article for *AVION*, planning and preparation by the airline are critical to a tender's success, and some of the key areas to plan are as follows:

1. Objectives

It is critical for the airline to know its objectives and priorities when issuing an RFP and to make sure they are clearly communicated to the suppliers. For example, is the driver of the tender a new creative strategy, new hardware system, or is it primarily a financial focus?

2. Parameters

Clarify the scope of work in detail—which services are included? There is a tendency to leave tenders open-ended, but even if asking for new ideas, these need to be

within a framework set by the airline, otherwise service providers can waste a great deal of time preparing ideas that may be unaffordable.

3. Evaluation

It is also important to clarify how the tender will be evaluated and what the criteria for a successful bid would be. Are the criteria weighted in any way? Service providers need to know what airlines are looking for and how they will be judged against other suppliers. It also helps the airline prioritise what's most important.

4. Process Plan

A well-thought-through process plan helps both the airline and the suppliers to be clear on how the project will be handled and what is expected at every stage. Communicating the final deadline is key, but also dates for Q&A sessions, information on the required format of the proposal, if a shortlist will be drawn up, and if a presentation will be required by short-listed companies. It is extremely helpful to have all the timings for these key stages clarified as early as possible so suppliers can plan their time and personnel requirements. Yours may not be the only tender they are working on!

5. Information, Information, Information

Part of the airline's planning process should be the gathering of information to enable suppliers to answer the tender properly. The suppliers' efforts should go into answering the tender to the best of their ability, not trying to find information that the airline has readily available but has not sent.

To deliver the best proposal, the service provider needs detailed information on all of the following:

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It is very helpful to receive copies of the entertainment guide and inflight magazine—a simple but effective way of conveying some of this important info. In addition reference tapes of current packaging would be useful.

6. Contact Point

Even if the airline believes all information a service provider could possibly need has been provided, we will still have questions! To expedite the process and make it manageable for both parties, it is essential to have one airline contact available through the process as the designated person to provide answers.

7. Time

It really is frustrating for suppliers if deadlines are too tight for them to be able to do justice to a proposal. Service providers need time to assimilate the information provided (and ask questions!), time to come up with ideas, time to work on costings, and time to put proposals together. The more time provided, the better the proposal will be—this cannot be emphasised too strongly.

8. \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$

There are two separate points to mention regarding tender finance. First, an airline needs to consider what financial information it is looking for in the proposals and whether a complete budget is really necessary, or an indication of unit costs achievable is sufficient for the first stage. If a detailed budget is required, then it is critical to provide a budget template for suppliers to complete in order to be able to compare like with like. This is part of the important preparation stage.

Second, it is worth remembering that there is a cost attached to doing tenders for the service providers in terms of people's time and also money for things that are produced such as tapes, graphics, etc. Yet at the same time as suppliers are funding more and more tenders, we are being asked to drive down service costs each time and accept lower margins.

Movies	How many?	Which languages?	How many flights for each language and system? (Don't add them all up!)	Frequency of change?	Which systems?
TV	How many programs/channels?	Which languages?	Which genres?	Frequency of change?	Which systems?
Scheduling	Do titles play in each direction? Is there a pattern to usage of titles for following months? Which titles are route-specific? Do any titles play only in one cabin? Is any content supplied by third parties?				
Systems	Which system operates on each type of aircraft?	Which supplier and model for each system?	What are the technical specifications?	Which company is responsible for screen updates?	Are any other third parties already contracted?
Cassettes	How many cassettes and which format for each system, title and language? (Don't add them all up!) Do you use graphics? If so, how are they used? Do ads need to be inserted? If so, how are they used?				
VOD	Who handles integration? What timelines do you currently work to? What style of template is used for metadata?				
Print	What materials are required for your publishers?				
Airline Information	What are the demographics of the passengers (in as much detail as possible)? What are the airline's brand values? What are the airline's priorities as a company? Plus any other background information available				

It would help if airlines were prepared to pay for travel to the presentation for example—this is an area where it becomes very costly for the service providers and is something which could be supplied without too much difficulty. Knowing what airlines are prepared to pay for upfront and also the potential length of the contract will assist the service provider in evaluating the likely income from the contract and how much money to invest in the bid.

9. Feedback
This is an area

where best practice frequently gets overlooked, but providing feedback on the areas of strength and weakness in a proposal is extremely useful. It helps focus the airline's evaluation in a disciplined way and provides valuable learning for the supplier. Sometimes, following a great deal of work by the supplier, there is barely an acknowledgement of the proposal, let alone specific feedback, particularly if the bid has been unsuccessful. This is an area where communication between airline and suppliers could be greatly enhanced.

10. In Summary

Information, communication, and time—these are the three cornerstones of running a successful RFP. If each of these areas is handled professionally and thoroughly by the airline, you will get the best response from your service provider. Following this simple ten-point plan will mean a smooth and happy process for all!

Ann Willis has recently been appointed Deputy Managing Director of the Entertainment Department for Spafax following three years as Director of UK Entertainment. Her areas of responsibility include programming services comprising creative strategy, acquisitions, and production, as well as client service.

Ann has worked at Spafax since 1992 and her initial role was running the British Airways dedicated IFE team. A graduate of London University in English and Drama, she joined the media graduate trainee scheme at Saatchi and Saatchi Advertising in 1984. After two years, Ann moved into Account Management at BMP DDB Needham Advertising for the following five years working on major blue-chip clients.