

REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP)

Sections of an RFP: An Easy Guide to Complex Proposals

With competition in every market getting fiercer, the transparency and predictability of federal contracting makes it increasingly attractive as a source of revenue. To help keep your eyes on the prize, CCS will walk you through a typical federal RFP one section at a time. Most federal RFPs are dense, confusing and filled with bureaucrat-speak and legal language. One reason is that federal procurement is more closely regulated than private sector contracting. Contractors in the federal sector often encounter convoluted sentences like this one:

“During the performance period of the task order, the TOM will continually and proactively monitor contractor efforts and obtain input from other Government personnel with performance oversight functions to ascertain the level of compliance with the Performance Standards.”

The source of this mind-boggling content is the Federal Acquisition Regulation, or FAR. A 53-part document weighing in at over 1900 pages, the FAR covers every type of federal procurement, including (of course) RFPs. Part 15 of the FAR outlines a uniform contract format for most federal contracts, designed to streamline the procurement process for agencies. Being able to break down the uniform contract format will give you more time to respond to the RFP.

Let's start breaking down a federal RFP:

Part I: The Schedule

The schedule will require the most action on your part. It contains everything you will need to do during the contract period and the instructions for doing it all properly.

Section A: General Information

This section often consists solely of a one-page solicitation form. This form gives basic information about the project. Here you will find where and when to submit your bid, contact information for the agency, and the solicitation number. This section also serves as a sort of Table of Contents for the rest of the RFP. In addition to the solicitation form, the General Information section might include other project information, such as incumbent contractors or special instructions for the rest of the RFP.

Bottom Line: As you continue to read the RFP, if you're not sure why something was included, or if something seems unclear, refer back to the General Information section to see if further explanation is offered.

Section B: Supplies or Services and Price/Costs

The bulk of your proposal lies within your responses to this section and to the Statement of Work (Section C). The Supplies or Services and Price/Costs section is a line-by-line list of

billable items, also known as Contract Line Items (CLINs). These line items will include labor, supplies, and other billable items such as travel expenses. This section will also specify pricing structure for the contract. In a fixed-price contract, the price you quote in your proposal should include all expenses and be final – you’ll be held to it if you’re awarded the contract. In a cost-plus or cost-reimbursement contract, you’ll be reimbursed for your expenses as contract work proceeds, and receive a fee that may be fixed or based on performance.

Bottom Line: Read this section carefully to make sure you respond to each CLIN and use the right pricing format.

Section C: Description/Specifications/Statement of Work

This is heart of the proposal, where you will learn what the agency wants from the contract. It’s also where you will describe exactly how you plan to fulfill the contract, both with labor and supplies. This is a good place to explain your choice of materials or outline why your company’s labor on this contract will provide the best value. You’ll also find a list of roles that will be required on the project, and any details on labor conditions such as work week and security clearances.

This section may include specifications for materials or a detailed quality assurance plan you must follow (quality assurance will also be covered in Inspection and Acceptance, Section E). In the case of cost-plus contracts, this section will also include the evaluation criteria that determine your fee. Not only will these factors affect your final pricing, failure to adhere to specifications in your proposal will almost certainly cost you the contract. While reading through the Statement of Work, keep the attachments included with the RFP (listed in the List of Attachments, Section J) close at hand – agencies often include supplementary materials and appendices that make the Statement of Work easier to understand.

Bottom Line: The Statement of Work boils down to what you’ll do, how you’ll do it, and how the government wants you to do it.

Section D: Packages and Marking

This section details how various line items are to be packed, labeled and shipped or delivered. Sometimes the information that would be in this section is rolled up into Deliveries or Performance (Section F) or Contract Administration Data (Section G).

Bottom Line: Make sure you factor in the time it will take to deliver, and how much it will cost you – if you don’t remember to list these in your pricing, you’ll be paying out of pocket.

Section E: Inspection and Acceptance

The federal government needs to take steps to safeguard itself from poor-quality work and materials, which is where this section comes in. It details the conditions that must be met for the work to be accepted by the government, as well as how it will be inspected. This may be as simple as a final examination by the contracting officer at the end of the contract,

or it may require you to follow and document an exacting quality assurance process. This section will also include what steps can be taken if the work doesn't pass inspection.

Bottom Line: Understand the inspection requirements and allow for time for inspection when planning to meet your deadlines.

Section F: Deliveries or Performance

This section maps out when, where and how different line items need to be delivered. Keep the Supplies or Services and Prices/Costs (Section B) close at hand while reading this section so you can easily refer to specific line item numbers. The Deliveries or Performance section is useful when drafting your project plan, as it tells you exactly when goods need to be delivered or services need to be performed.

Bottom Line: Study delivery dates closely when deciding whether or not to bid on the contract – will you have time to get it all done?

Section G: Contract Administration Data

The amount of contract administration data contained in a specific RFP will vary depending on the type of contract, the agency's needs, and the agency's resources, among other things. Some topics this section may cover include status reporting, accounting information, and contact information for key agency personnel. This section informs both you and agency personnel on the ways you will interact during the contract.

Bottom Line: Use the Contract Administration Data to help clarify the terms of your relationships with the agency – including how often you'll need to check in, what forms you'll need to submit, how and when you'll be paid, and who your main points of contact will be.

Section H: Special Contract Requirements

What makes this section different from the Description/Specifications/Statement of Work (Section C) or Contract Administration Data (Section G)? The requirements in this section fall outside of the actual goods you'll deliver or services you'll perform (although it may affect them), and don't directly pertain to the administration of the contract. In a less bureaucratic world, this section would probably be titled "Other Requirements."

Bottom Line: Special Contract Requirements is basically a catch-all for anything that is not covered earlier in the schedule.

Tip: When preparing your proposal, it can be helpful to consolidate the requirements from all parts of the schedule (your contract line items, contract administration data, special contract requirements, etc.) into one master list to make sure you leave nothing out. This list is only for your eyes, though – you'll still have to respond to each section in the specified format for your official proposal.

Part II: Contract Clauses

Section I: Contract Clauses

This section contains any clauses required by law, and could be a single paragraph, a large index, or left blank, depending on the contract.

Bottom Line: Don't overlook the Contract Clauses. Even if you don't need to respond to anything from this section, you will be bound by its clauses.

Part III: List of Documents, Exhibits and Other Attachments

Section J: List of Attachments

Just as Section A is a Table of Contents for the rest of the RFP, Section J is a cross-referenced Table of Contents for any appendices and supplementary materials included. Use it while responding to the Description/Specifications/Statement of Work (Section C).

Bottom Line: Other sections of the RFP will refer back to various attachments. Keep them accessible to help you understand the RFP.

Part IV: Representations and Instructions

Section K: Representations, Certifications and Other Statements of Offerors

Don't let the long title of this section intimidate you. It lets you know how to prove to the government that you are eligible to bid on and perform this contract. It will ask for things including your tax information, verification that your hiring and employment practices are valid, and your small or disadvantaged business status.

Bottom Line: Read this section very carefully, and early on. If your company is unqualified in some way to win the contract, all the hard work and expense of preparing the proposal will be wasted.

Section L: Proposal Preparation Instructions and Other

Fortunately, this section takes the guesswork out of how to prepare the proposal. This section enables the contracting officer to quickly read and find essential information in all submitted proposals. It's very important to adhere exactly to all requirements set down in this section. These may include font and formatting; organization of the material; policies on amendments, withdrawals, and disclosures; and proposal delivery.

Bottom Line: The Proposal Preparation Instructions offer guidelines on how, exactly, the agency wants the proposal to be prepared. Deviating from these instructions could cost you the contract.

Section M: Evaluation Factors for Award

This section details the main factors that will be considered when awarding the contract, as well as how important each factor is. In most cases, the proposal evaluators will score each proposal based on these criteria, and the highest-scoring proposal will be awarded the contract. As you write your proposal, keep these factors on mind.

Bottom Line: This section clues you in on what is most important to the agency with this contract. When the proposal is completed, have someone go over it using this section to score it as the agency would.

Getting the Contracting Advantage

Mastering the intricacies of the uniform contract format will shorten the time it takes to organize your proposal, allowing you more time to strengthen it. You'll need as much time as possible to prepare a dynamite proposal. Unfortunately, one of the main problems that contractors encounter when bidding on federal contracts is hearing about RFPs and solicitations too late to prepare proposals and market to government decision makers. Network locally and keep your ears open as most jobs will be discussed almost a year out from the formal solicitation.

If on a GSA Schedule, RFPs can come to you from federal buyers. Also, you can skip this whole process by responding to Request for Quotes (RFQ) through GSA's ebuy system. If in fact an agency does ask you to write a RFP, you can use much of the same information in your original GSA solicitation to cover down on many of the aforementioned section because you have already been pre screened for competency, compliance, capacity and your prices have already been deemed fair and reasonable. Within the RFP, list your GSA contract number so a buyer can easily pull up your information making which can streamline the acquisition process, reduce the amount of oversight needed, reduce their risk and increase transparency. Most people bidding are through open market solicitations. With a GSA contract, your competition is with those in the pre-approved space not necessarily the millions out there on the open market. Market yourself smartly. Speak the government language. Analyze your competition and differentiate yourself in areas such as maintenance, ROIs, payback periods, quality, experience, patents or trademarks, green attributes, pre approved, network, capacity etc. Everything should come down to, "How can I make it easy for the buyer to do business with me?"

Consider Entering Into a Contractor Team Arrangement vs. acting as a Sub Contractor

If there are areas of the RFP you can't perform but you wish to sub out, choose your sub contractors wisely as the project manager is responsible for the work they perform. It is recommended that you enter into Teaming Arrangements with other pre approved GSA contract holders that can provide the part you may lack. Under a Contractor Team Arrangement (CTA), two or more GSA Schedule contractors work together, by complementing each other's capabilities, to offer a total solution to meet an ordering activity's requirement. Contractor Team Arrangements provide a "win-win" situation for both GSA Schedule contractors and ordering activities:

- GSA Schedule contractors may compete for Schedule orders for which they may not independently qualify;
- Ordering activities may procure a total solution rather than making separate buys for each part of a requirement;

- CTAs can provide companies competitive advantages over other choosing to include less qualified, non pre approved vendors to complete tasks within the larger RFP; and
- In most cases when using ARRA stimulus funds, fixed price contractors/pre approved vendors must be hired at all levels or face funds withdrawal.

At some point, a small company might want to consider teaming with a prime contractor if it desires to market its products to the federal government. A teaming agreement or subcontracting agreement may also be appropriate if a prime contractor and sub-contractor want to do a competitive "sell" of their capabilities to the government. By teaming with an appropriate partner, a competent small business could successfully compete for government business that it might not otherwise be able to obtain on its own. From the prime's perspective, a team arrangement alleviates the need for the prime to enter into a competition with other potential subcontractors after award of the prime contract. If the sub-contractor's product is vital to the overall system, it would make the teaming proposal that much more competitive.

In a traditional prime-subcontractor relationship, only the prime contractor has a contractual relationship with the government procuring agency. This "privity of contract" imposes significant contractual obligations on the prime, but also important contractual rights, such as the right to bring a claim against the government under the Contracts Disputes Act.

By contrast, a subcontractor in a traditional prime-sub teaming relationship is not a signatory to the prime contract, and therefore, lacks privity of contract with the procuring agency. The lack of privity can create hurdles for subcontractors. They are unable to file claims directly with the procuring agency, and in many cases, procurement officials will not even discuss contractual issues with them.

Instead, the subcontractor is left to rely on the prime contractor to "pass through" its claims and/ or contractual concerns to the government. This indirect relationship can be frustrating, and depending on the language of the subcontract, legally challenging.

At least in GSA Federal Supply Schedule ("FSS") teaming situations, a recent Board of Contract Appeals decision will help subcontractors overcome these difficulties. In *Key Federal Finance v. General Services Administration*, CBCA No. 411, April 19, 2007, the Civilian Agency Board of Contract Appeals held that a member of a teaming relationship formed by two GSA Schedule contractors had privity of contract with the procuring agency, and therefore, the right to file a claim directly with the agency.

Other benefits include the ability to get paid directly from the government and the inability for the main Prime or project Manager to cut you out of the deal once the proposal has been submitted. As a sub contractor any job you do for the government is not seen as a direct job. However, as part of the Team, the government will view work performed as direct business with the government, which can help open doors when discussing past

performance. For a Contractor Teaming Arrangement Agreement see this site for a template:

<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/2947821/GSA-TEAMING-AGREEMENT>

To Respond or Not Respond; That is the Question

The Go or No-Go Decision

When pursuing government projects, you need to weigh your options closely before you begin writing a response for an RFP. If part of the contract doesn't match your company's best interests or you can't deliver on part of the contract, the smartest move may be to concentrate your resources elsewhere. So what types of questions should you ask yourself when deciding on writing a response for an RFP? In the Go or No-Go decision-making process, here are some questions to consider:

1. Is the requested project response an RFP or an RFI?

If the project is an RFP, the government is looking to buy. However, if it's an RFI, the government is requesting information about the market for the particular service or product. It's possible that an RFI will turn into an RFP, so consider responding if your product or service sets itself apart from the market. The government will use the RFI information to put together a proposal and your RFI response may play an important part. However, don't give away your crown jewels—mark any private information "proprietary", otherwise the government will use the RFI information as they see fit.

2. Is the RFP requesting a product or service that fits your company?

It may seem like the more RFPs you respond to, the better your chances at winning contracts (like the lottery). However, the best strategy for writing a response for an RFP is to find the right fit and concentrate on the contracts that are a good fit for your company's business focus. Passing up an opportunity that "sort of" fits your company's business focus will free up your time to pursue other opportunities. Note that if you find an RFP that is a good match for your company but it seems like it's been written with a specific company in mind, consider writing a response for the RFP anyway. If you demonstrate in your RFP information that you can offer similar products and tack on extra benefits (lower price, guarantee, etc.), you still have a possibility of winning.

3. Is the project funded?

Although an RFP is a sign that the government is looking to buy, it doesn't necessarily mean that the funds for the project are available. All you have to do is ask the purchasing office if the project is funded. Without funding, you may put a lot of time and effort into writing a response for an RFP when nothing may come of it. If you're given RFP information indicating that there's a reserve fund for the project, there is still no guarantee that you will see a contract. If a priority need arises, the government has the right to reallocate the funding to the prioritized project.

4. What are your marketing considerations?

How new is your product or service? Also, if you win the contract award, will it compromise other accounts or cost you an existing account?

5. What is your business relationship with the customer?

What is your business standing with the government buyer? Is it good or sustained? If you've decided that you're not going to pursue the project but you've already been getting RFP information from the contracting officer or buyer, it's a good idea to send a letter or email note letting them know that you're not writing a response for the RFP and the reasons why.

Writing an RFP: Pick Up a Pencil & Get Organized

Preparing to respond to a government RFP can be very time-consuming and intimidating if you don't know what's involved or how to best prepare for the proposal writing process. Before you even dig out a pencil or start typing out a draft of your government proposal, it's important to get organized in order to get things done right in the first place. Consider the following to help you prepare for your government proposal writing process:

- Reread the RFP.
- Create an outline of the RFP and delegate people to handle different sections. If you are the sole person responsible for writing the RFP, be sure to take notes on where you need to gather and prepare the required information.
- Create a timeline or calendar where you set goals and deadlines for each section of the proposal.
- Contact the buying office and ask for the evaluation criteria that the office uses to measure proposals. While you have the buyer or contracting official on the phone, clarify any questions you may have and ask if there is anything else you need to know.

Once you decide that you want to go after the government contract and prepare for a government proposal, you can begin planning for the content. There are some common criteria that evaluators look for when reviewing proposals that you should keep in mind when writing your proposal:

- Is the proposal formatted according to the instructions?
- Have you presented a plausible solution in the proposal?
- Is the proposal organized and does it respond to the basic layout requirement?
- Are all other proposal requirements met?
- Have you provided an acceptable delivery schedule?
- Have you demonstrated your capability to perform?
- How have you demonstrated your related experience or past performance history?
- Is your financial situation stable?
- Are you proposing a reasonable price for the project?
- Are your costing methods credible?

- Will you need the help of subcontractors? If there is a part of the contract for which you will need assistance from an outside source, be sure to outline it in your proposal.
- In writing the various sections, do not skim on details or attempt to gloss over certain issues. For example, don't leave any required RFP sections blank. If you've already dealt with a particular issue elsewhere in the document, say "Please see Section XX."
- Don't assume that the evaluators will have any special knowledge about your business or industry, such as the fact that your company is the oldest or the largest or the most award-winning. Evaluators are supposed to base their decisions solely on what's in the proposal or bid.
- Wherever possible, use tables, charts and other graphic elements to summarize information and help the evaluators understand your government proposal or bid. Graphic elements also serve to break up long stretches of type.
- Throughout the process, members of the writing team will need to communicate on a regular basis. You may want to hold periodic team meetings to make sure everyone is on track and there are no surprises. You can also review good government RFP examples to prep your team to write the next government RFP.
- You'll also need to make sure that members of the team understand that all deadlines are firm. Remind them that much important work still remains after they've finished writing and that the agency's closing date is absolute.

Proposal writing is hard, often tedious work because of the intense concentration required to write well. Because of this, your writing team should be given as much help as possible. Help could include:

- A proposal outline written in as much detail as possible. The detailed outline will give the writers a structure to help make their written material look as consistent as possible.
- An automated library of proposal writing tools and standard material.
- Section templates and writing examples.
- Writing guidelines.

The Proposal Outline

Most successful proposal leaders and writers follow a set of guidelines for writing an outline and conceiving proposal content. Here are some examples:

- Write a proposal to solve the customers problems as THEY perceive them, not how YOU perceive them.
- Don't try to think for the customer. Give the customer everything asked for in the RFP, down to the minutest of detail. Write to each and every solicitation requirement, even if it appears to be meaningless on the surface. Remember, evaluators love to eliminate proposals to save time and effort or, sometimes, to help their favorite company.
- Write the outline using topic and subtopic sentences whenever possible.

- Explain how you will meet each and every requirement in a clear, concise manner. Explain why you are unique but only when you can be convincing and the uniqueness stands up to scrutiny.
- Give evaluators the material they need to support a decision in your favor.
- Use simple, easy to understand language; avoid long-winded sentences and paragraphs.
- Develop a concise staffing and project management plan without any ambiguities in staffing and personnel qualifications. Rewrite resumes of staff members to specifically address the RFP requirements. Interview proposed staff members to determine the specifics of their experience and its relevance to the requirements.
- Do not present extraneous or marginal material.
- Tailor your corporate qualifications (and general information) to match the specific requirements of the RFP.
- Differentiate yourself from your competitors. Know your strengths and weaknesses and your competitors' strength and weaknesses, and write to all four of these points.
- Find ways to present your solutions as unique while still meeting the requirements of the RFP.
- Write to the specific benefits of your company, your project team, and your solutions and substantiate each of these.
- Don't get caught in the inherent trap that your company is the customer "end all, beat all." Everyone thinks this way but your confidence means nothing to the customer unless its backed up with references, performance data, and facts.
- Acknowledge your weaknesses in relation to the requirements and negate them as much as possible.

Proposal Writing Library

Proposal material can be used over and over again, saving time, but you must methodically tailor it to the particular proposal you are writing. Don't be in a last minute hurry and get caught in the trap of using standard material without tailoring it. The evaluators will see through this. Your library should include:

- Proposal writing books and training materials.
- Corporate qualifications.
- Staff resumes. (Remember again: the standard resumes need to be tailored too.)
- Past performance material and statistics.
- Success stories.
- References. (Cleared of course.)
- Model proposal material including project management approaches, technical descriptions, and chapter introductions.
- Competitors proposals obtained from public information requests.

Automate the library as much as possible so the writers can move the material electronically.

Consider buying proposal-writing software (but know of course that its no substitute for the hard work that has to be done). Use your original GSA solicitation paperwork. You can pull out information about your corporate qualifications (technical portion of the offer), bios/resumes of key personnel (technical portion and contract specific business plan), include your D&B Past Performance evaluation (technical portion) as well as past project descriptions (technical), references (use references used for the D&B Past Performance Evaluation), approaches (see technical portion of offer) and more.

Developing Templates and Writing Examples

Large proposals require many writers. These writers will inevitably produce material with different styles, levels of clarity, and consistency. By sending templates and writing samples to the writers, you help even things out, put everyone on the same page so to speak. The following is an example of a writing template:

Section Title (Write a summary of the section here.)

Subsection Title (Write a simple declarative sentence stating the theme of the subtopic.)

Understanding (Write a background paragraph(s) describing your understanding of the customers requirements, problems, etc. Be insightful.)

Solution (Write a paragraph(s) describing your solution to the customer's requirements, problems, etc. Be creative.)

Features (Describe the features/elements/aspects/characteristics of your solution. Be clear and concise.)

Benefits (Describe the specific benefits of your proposed solution to the customer. This is the critical section. Be thorough and provide as much evidence as you can that the benefits will accrue to the customer.)

Conclusion/Summary (Summarize the subtopic themes again except in a paragraph.)

Writing Guidelines

The following writing guidelines (and others you have developed) should be given to the proposal writing team.

- Writing style is important. Write from a logical outline and use topic and subtopic headings.
- Structure the first paragraph in a topic and subtopic so that it presents the primary point first. Summarize every chapter and topic with a brief paragraph.
- Use trigger words, known facts, statistics and specific reasons to convince the reader of the primary point, e.g., a unique feature, capability, or benefit.
- Illustrate as much as possible.
- Use appendices for detailed material.
- Do not use big words in an attempt to impress your customer. Avoid unnecessary words.
- Avoid subjective adjectives that sound boastful. Be specific. Use such phrases as "10-year track record," rather than "excellent track record."

- Avoid long sentences, long winded discussions in general, and keep your paragraphs concise and short.
- Help your solution writers write in as clear and concise a style as they are capable of. Clear, concise writing has the following characteristics:
 - ✓ Logically and consistently organized. E.g., if one writer is presenting understanding of the requirements, solutions, solution features, solution benefits, and benefit substantiation, in that order, then have all writers present their material in the same order. Give the section writers templates and an example of a well-written section to follow.
 - ✓ Easy to read and understand. Again, topic sentences, short paragraphs, and no extra words. Use simple declarative sentences. Think Hemingway, not Faulkner.

In summary, you should develop a technical proposal that is clear and concise in describing exactly how you will meet the requirements stated in the RFP. Make it as easy as possible on the evaluators who have a big pile of proposals to read.

The Review Process

You need to conduct reviews because they are critical to the quality of the proposal. You should have at least two reviews, one at the second draft (called a Red Team review) and one at the final draft stage. Above all, don't just review the draft in the final hours before the proposal goes out the door because it's usually too late by then.

The review team should evaluate the proposal from the customer's perspective. Be brutal and act like an evaluator. Compare everything in the proposal to the requirements in the RFP. Have the solutions and benefits come out? Is the writing clear concise, easy to read and understand? Point out where it isn't. Fixing such problems could be the difference between winning and losing.

You can be more informal for small proposals but the fundamentals are the same. Don't shorten the review process due to a lack of time. If you are short of time and the proposal shows it, consider canning the proposal. In reviewing and preparing to reach the final draft stage, the proposal leader writing team should ask the following questions:

- Did our understanding of the customers needs and our proposed solutions and benefits come out clearly?
- Are the writers on track and writing consistently among their respective sections?
- Does the proposal read like a unified whole?
- Have they hit on new themes and pertinent solutions?

After this review, the team prepares a second draft of the proposal. This draft is subject to the most important review of all, the Red Team Review.

Things to Avoid

The State of California published the following list of proposal statements that caused the proposals to be rejected. Do your best to avoid such statements.

- A bid stated, "The prices stated within are for your information only and are subject to change."
- A bid stated, "This proposal shall expire thirty (30) days from this date unless extended in writing by the xyz Company." (In this instance, award was scheduled to be approximately 45 days after bid submittal date.)
- A bid for lease of EDP equipment contained lease plans of a duration shorter than that which had been requested.
- A personal services contract stated, "xyz, in its judgment, believes that the schedules set by the State are extremely optimistic and probably unobtainable. Nevertheless, xyz will exercise its best efforts..."
- A bid stated, "This proposal is not intended to be of a contractual nature."
- A bid contained the notation "prices are subject to change without notice."
- A bid was received for the purchase of EDP equipment with unacceptable modifications to the Purchase Contract.
- A bid for lease of EDP equipment contained lease plans of a duration longer than that which had been requested in the IFB with not provision for earlier termination of the contract.
- A bid for lease of EDP equipment stated, "...this proposal is preliminary only and the order, when issued, shall constitute the only legally binding commitment of the parties."
- A bid was delivered to the wrong office.
- A bid was delivered after the date and time specified in the IFB.
- An IFB required the delivery of a performance bond covering 25 percent of the proposed contract amount. The bid offered a performance bond to cover "x" dollars which was less than the required 25 percent of the proposed contract amount.

Top 10 Mistakes Your RFP Should Avoid

Make sure your government bids and government proposals are practical and your paperwork is perfect. You may write the greatest government bids or proposals in the world, but if you fail to present them in a sophisticated, professional manner, you won't get the government contract.

1. Using complex language in your government bids and government proposals. Keep your proposal simple and easy to follow. Use easy-to-understand language and avoid long-winded sentences and paragraphs.
2. Submitting a bid on government contracts that will place your current government projects at risk. All too often, businesses submit government proposals or bids they can't fully complete. Before applying for a contract, make sure you possess the skills and resources required to finish the project.

Otherwise, you'll find yourself scrambling to meet the contract requirements while your other projects suffer.

3. Not accepting credit cards for payment. Many government agencies now prefer to use merchant credit cards and government purchase cards to buy goods and services. If you don't accept plastic, you may miss out on these government contracting opportunities. Many government contractors are also waking up to the benefits of credit card transactions. Instead of having to fill out detailed paperwork and wait for a check, they receive immediate payment.
4. Pricing an item in incorrect units. Many experts say this is the most common mistake made in submitting a bid. A typical example is submitting a bid on gallons when the request was for quarts. It may seem like a simple error, but it could cost you a government contract.
5. Submitting messy government bids. Just as you wouldn't send a coffee-stained business card to a potential client, you should not submit a proposal that is unprofessional in style or appearance. Before you seal the envelope, double-check your document for typos, blank pages, unnumbered or mis-numbered pages, smudges, rips and poor grammar.
6. Having preconceived notions about what specific government agencies need. Don't knock yourself out of consideration by assuming a government agency doesn't need your products. You never know: the City of Seattle may, in fact, be looking for scuba equipment. Contact the government agency before you decide. Businesses are often pleasantly surprised by what agencies will buy.
7. Focusing on frills rather than fundamentals. Instead of putting all your effort into dazzling government buyers with your marketing flair, you should concentrate on making your proposal or bid rejection-proof. Begin by responding to each and every requirement in the government solicitation. This makes it impossible for the agency to reject you for being non-responsive to the solicitation. Next, make sure your proposal offers a clear and well thought-out solution that will solve the problem at hand while calling attention to the direct benefits of your proposal. This makes it impossible for the agency to reject you for being not as qualified as other bidders, and the client cannot reject your bid on the grounds that you will not add value to the contract. Finally, make sure you firmly follow the rules of government bids and government proposals.
8. Not allowing enough time. When it comes to government bids and government proposals, the clock starts working against you from day one. Not only will you need time to check and recheck your documents, but you'll also need time to read any agency-specific rules and regulations and other information that will help you write your submission. Most importantly, you'll want to begin calculating the time and materials you will need to fulfill the government contract. You'll need this information to determine your bid price — a vital part of the proposal. Finally, make sure you allow enough time for your proposal to reach the agency office before the deadline.
9. Ignoring or underestimating your competitors. A crucial goal of your proposal is to differentiate yourself from your competitors. How much more efficiently will you do the job? Why is your price better than theirs? What benefits will the agency receive if it works with your company instead of your competitor? If you

- haven't taken time to study and understand your competitors, it's unlikely that you'll beat them to the contract.
10. Inconsistency. Last but not least, it's important to review your bid for consistency before you send it off. Is your work plan in agreement with your budget and schedule? Do your figures add up? Are you consistent with measurements and any other elements that are vital to your proposal?

Tips to Success

- Be sure to take advantage of the question period (if applicable) to clarify the RFP. All interested parties should have access to all the questions asked and the corresponding answers.
- Viewing the questions from other interested vendors is a valuable tool to determine who else is bidding on the project, and their ideas about the project.