

Improving Your Bid Response Package

By Julie Knudson

Bid responses are the pivot point in winning a contract—one bidder will succeed and the rest will not. But the importance of the bid process doesn't stop some dealers from submitting responses that are outdated and ineffective. Your clients have changed, and so have their methods for evaluating bidders. With today's ultra-competitive environment, it's time to rethink your bid response platform.

Consider the challenges facing your clients, and how they're different than some years past.

Economic pressures

The poor economy has pushed many seasoned professionals out the door, meaning your clients today may have little inexperience in the industry. That inexperience could lead them to miss or misinterpret information if it isn't clearly explained. Your ability to demonstrate your expertise without appearing threatening or confusing will be critical.

While a bleak economy may have put your contact into their current position, it's also put them under a lot of pressure. Inexperienced clients are eager to prove their worth, and you're in a position to help make their project a success. By tactfully educating the client as part of the bid process, you can succeed along with them.

Additional decision-makers

Other groups—purchasing, accounting, and legal among them—are increasingly involved in the bid process on the client's side of things. There's a good chance your response will be pulled apart, with chunks being reviewed by folks unfamiliar with the industry.

Because these groups aren't involved in the daily management of the project (or its aftermath), it's likely they don't share your client's view on needs and priorities.

Couple these external influences and differing motivators with a client who may not have enough expertise to defend or explain your bid, and it's a recipe for disaster. If your response is vague, unclear or haphazard, you may not make it to the shortlist.

Information overload

It's a buyer's market, which has led some clients to increase the number of bidders in the hope it will drive costs down.

Clients may have a dozen or more bid responses to read, and they're likely to begin skimming your response at the first opportunity. The last thing you want them to do is grow frustrated with your generic answers and flip straight to the price page, but a response that's jammed with marketing-speak and useless information will prompt them to do just that.

With the client's perspective in mind, the need to craft a more targeted bid response becomes clear.

As vendors, your challenge is to formulate a response that gives the client everything they asked for, while also demonstrating the value of your expertise, the strength of your resources, and the benefits the client will reap by choosing you.

The following principles will help you to create a response package that's up to the task.

Be clear

Respond honestly and directly to every question posed in the RFP. Don't expect you'll have an opportunity to provide additional details later, and don't assume your client has enough industry experience to extrapolate or infer anything beyond your answers.

When striving to present information clearly, don't be shy about including a list of assumptions or exceptions in your response. This makes it clear to the client that you've made your best attempt at an accurate bid, but some things in the RFP were poorly explained or missing.

“...turn the bid process into relationship-building pay dirt.”

continued on page 22

Hopefully you can trigger a dialog with the client that reveals additional details, but at the very least it gives you the opportunity to address change orders or other future modifications to the project.

Be concise

Answer each question fully, and then stop. Don't include anything extraneous to the question, unless it is also relevant (see below). Vendors are sometimes inclined to play up their strengths with a little soft marketing, but resist this temptation. Clients will stop reading as soon as your bid response starts looking like a sales pitch.

Keep it relevant

Provide information relevant only to *this* RFP. It may be appropriate to include information that wasn't specifically requested, but that directly pertains to how you'll execute the project or serve the client's needs. This information is designed not to quietly sing your praises, but to

help the client make the best decision. Look at your existing bid response. If anything can't pass the relevance test, now is the time to remove it.

When determining relevance, it's critical to once again think back to how your client will interpret the information you provide. What's relevant to you may be worthless to the client, and information vital to one bid response may not belong in another. One exception exists, and that is when an RFP invites bidders to attach marketing or other materials as a separate addendum or in addition to information specifically requested.

Careful planning and a thoughtful implementation can turn the bid process into relationship-building pay dirt. And by crafting every bid response with an eye toward how it will be received, used and interpreted by your client, you'll increase your chances of success.



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