



# Putting the Training Wheels On

by James Jensen

*James Jensen is the Director of Project Management at Boston Children's Museum. He may be contacted at [jensen@BostonChildrensMuseum.org](mailto:jensen@BostonChildrensMuseum.org)*

Five years ago, I had no idea what an RFP was, let alone an RFQ, despite having worked in the exhibits side of museums for several years. Since then, I have been involved with the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) and Request for Proposals (RFP) process several times, for projects of varying scopes and budgets.

I joined the staff of the Connecticut Historical Society Museum (CHSM) in 2001, during the early planning stages for a proposed large history center. While this was moving forward, CHSM continued to present a regular program of exhibits of a modest size (roughly 2000 sq ft). Since it was expected that eventually there would be a need for CHSM to use a more formal process to select exhibit designers and fabricators for the history center, one of these smaller projects was chosen to give the RFQ/RFP process “a whirl” while the stakes were a bit lower. It was a great opportunity to figure out what would be needed later on. Pursuing the complete RFQ and RFP process for a 2000 sq ft space with a fabrication budget of around \$100,000 could be considered overkill, but the effort repaid itself handsomely when it came time to consider a larger project.

In 2003 CHSM assumed operation of a significant landmark site in downtown Hartford, CT (the Old State House—OSH.) Significant funding from the State of Connecticut for a new large exhibit (7000 sq ft) and education center (1800 sq ft) was provided. With the State funding came the need to secure design and fabrication services using a carefully structured process. This process built on what had been learned during the initial effort (mentioned above), incorporating additional requirements from the State of Connecticut.

An RFQ and RFP process was followed to select an exhibit design firm, an architect, an exhibit fabricator, an audio-visual system design and integration firm, and an audio tour provider. The project opened in September 2006, and from the State's point of view the RFQ and RFP process proceeded well - so much so that CHSM was held up as a model for other organizations in Connecticut pursuing similar projects with State assistance.

Finally, a version of the documents developed at CHSM was employed following my move to the Boston Children's Museum in late 2005. The RFP process was used to select fabricators for several exhibit spaces within the \$47 million expansion of the museum scheduled to open in April, 2007. Currently, an RFQ process to select designers for exhibits to open in 2008 and 2009 is underway.

Having been through all this, I now feel somewhat able to share some thoughts about the process and what to consider doing and not doing during it.

## **Before You Start**

This may seem obvious, but it's a good idea to know what it is you want to do before you go to the bother of starting an RFQ and RFP process. So, you should already have defined the project's goals and objectives, the budget, the expected schedule, and funding sources. It will be obvious to potential vendors if these things are not present, and they may take a pass on your RFQ or RFP as a result. They are looking for real work—not work that “may” exist.

There are a number of tasks that you will need to consider and complete to see this process through. The time needed to follow this process

can be lengthy—weeks, if not months—from start to finish, and you will need to consider this as you proceed. From personal experience, and Andolsek (2004), these include:

- Identify your project team
  - Develop schedule
  - Produce project description
  - Set budget
  - Develop RFQ and RFP process schedule
  - Agree on evaluation criteria
  - Write RFQ
  - Send out RFQ
  - Respond to questions from vendors
  - Evaluation and notify vendors
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- Write RFP
  - Send out RFP
  - Respond to questions from vendors
  - Interview vendors
  - Check references
  - Evaluation and select
  - Notify vendors
  - Contract negotiation
  - Debrief vendors not selected

### **Why Bother With this Process?**

As David Griscom notes, (in Skalsky and Holland, 2005) hiring a design (or fabrication etc) “firm is just like hiring a critical employee”. At its best, this two-step (RFQ and RFP) process will help you and your institution to establish a comfortable working relationship for what will likely be a complicated and expensive project.

This process generally makes little sense for small projects. It’s unlikely any vendors will be willing to make the effort to respond for a \$10, 000 job. But for jobs of \$ 100, 000 and

over it may make sense—and as the total project cost increases it becomes almost vital.

### **The Vendor View of RFQs and RFPs**

Many firms have a love/hate relationship with RFQs and RFPs. For most firms, responding to an RFQ (or an RFP) is time consuming and can also involve a great deal of anxiety (Kerner, 2003). Poorly written RFQs and RFPs put them in the position of developing a proposal without a clear understanding of what is expected of them. They are under no obligation to respond to your RFQ or RFP—you have to make them feel that entering into the process with your institution is worth the effort.

One of the most important things to remember is that although ultimately you will use this process to select a vendor you hope to be happy working with, the process also has to be conducted in a manner that makes it easy for the vendors to participate. The RFQ and RFP must both be clear and concise, and provide clear direction. Many of the exhibit design and fabrication (and other) firms you may be dealing with will have seen plenty of RFQs and RFPs in the past—and if yours seems poorly prepared, demands too much of them, or will be too much work to complete, they will simply choose not to respond. This deprives you of a potentially viable vendor to work with. For those that do choose to respond to a poor RFQ and RFP, it gives them an indication of what working with your institution may be like over the course of the project. You want the process to be positive, straightforward, and as stress free as possible for all parties involved (your institution included!).

Firms always prefer to work with clients that appear to be “together”—that have a sense



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of what they are doing and know what they want. This will come through in the quality of the documents you provide them, how you respond to their questions, and your general responsiveness during the process. A lack of responsiveness will make them nervous about what actually working with you might be like in the long run if they are selected. A little courtesy can go a long way, particularly for the firms that are ultimately not selected—they want to know that they were treated fairly.

#### **Selection Committee**

A selection committee that will review the submissions (RFQ and RFP) should be set up at the beginning of the process. The committee should be at least two people, and several more, if possible. It's important to try to keep the people on this committee consistent throughout the whole process. It's also important that at least some of the individuals on the committee should have some experience with the area being contracted—exhibit design, fabrication, etc.

#### **The Request for Qualifications**

Why go to the bother of going through this two step process? It probably seems like a lot of work... You might in fact be able to skip this first step if you have a pool of 3 to 5 firms you already know and think you would be comfortable working with (Tooker, 2006). But if you aren't fully comfortable with just the firms you know, or want to open up the field to see who is out there and what they might have to offer, an RFQ can be very helpful. Using an RFQ first helps you find the most qualified firms for your project, not just the one with the lowest price.

A Request for Qualifications, then, lets you narrow down a lengthy list of contender firms and have a better knowledge of them. Also,

the RFQ indicates to potential vendors that a final selection is not going to be made on price alone, but also on the quality of the work they have done.

First you will need to develop a list of potential vendors. The AAM Official Museum Directory™, ASTC Products and Services directory ([www.astc.org/members/pslist/pslist.htm](http://www.astc.org/members/pslist/pslist.htm)), recommendations from colleagues, and other resources (such as online listings) serve as good starting points. In some circumstances (as was the case with OSH) that involve government funding, advertisements of both the RFQ and RFP may need to be placed to ensure the process is as “open” as possible. You may also want to consider limiting the field to firms that are in relative proximity to your location if you are concerned about travel costs during the project.

For the OSH projects, the RFQ for exhibit design was sent to 20 firms, and most chose to respond.

#### **RFQ Components and Notes**

It is vital that your RFQ is clear and direct, and making it unduly long can immediately discourage potential vendors. Most should not exceed 30 pages (and shorter is better), not including appendices (Andolsek, 2004). It takes time for firms to put together the responses, and you will get much better responses if the RFQ is short and clear.

Although some guidelines of what to ask for are shown below, you can add to or delete from them as you see fit. Keep in mind, however, that if your requests are not reasonable firms may choose not to respond.

Note that in this two-step process, potential

vendors should only be asked to provide their qualifications at this stage—not how they propose to do your project, or what it may cost. That will only be asked of shortlisted firms invited to submit an RFP.

The RFQ should be sent out with plenty of lead time and a reasonable schedule for selection and notification. Bigger projects will require more time. Not providing sufficient time will result in requests for more time from vendors, or cause them to drop out.

Also, remember to ask potential vendors to inform you if they do not intend to respond so that you are not waiting around on the deadline day wondering if something is coming or not from them!

- 1) Background of institution
- 2) Project Description/Overview
  - a. What is the work, the context, audience, goals, etc.
- 3) Budget (if known)
  - a. At least provide a range, even if you do not intend to provide the actual number
- 4) Specific needs/discipline sought (exhibit design, fabrication, etc)
  - a. Special requirements/services required
- 5) Contact person for technical questions (include email, phone, fax, hours to contact, deadline for questions)
- 6) Submission date and place
- 7) Any special terms that might apply to contract
  
- 8) Description of qualifications to be submitted
- 9) Evaluation criteria
- 10) How many copies needed?
  - ask for enough for the selection committees' use
  - be reasonable—don't ask for twenty or more copies



Old State House Construction. © CHSM

You can also include a confidentiality statement in the RFQ (and RFP later on) to protect any ideas in the document from being shared.

### Questions and Answers

You will need to provide an opportunity for firms to ask questions before they submit their qualifications. No matter how diligent you are in preparing the RFQ, you will still manage to omit something, or provide direction that is not as clear as you hoped. This is why the Q+A is so important. Set a deadline for receipt of questions and state it in the RFQ, and indicate who the contact person is. Encourage firms to send questions by email. This makes it easier for you to collate them and send ALL the questions and responses to ALL the vendors, regardless of which firm asked them. Doing so ensures a level playing field for all potential vendors. Note that all questions should be listed anonymously when they are sent out. Email is preferred for this as taking questions by phone allows the possibility that you may inadvertently provide information to one vendor that the others may not benefit from.

### Evaluation, Ranking and Shortlist

As noted above, you should have established evaluation criteria before sending out the RFQ. A good process to follow (as described in Skalsky and Holland, 2005) is to have all selection committee members rank each





An RFP's end result: **History All Around Us** gallery at the Old State House. © CHSM

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submission independently. Then, the committee should meet as a group to compare scoring to reach consensus on the top three to five submissions. Make sure to take notes during selection discussions. Once you've reviewed and ranked all the firms submissions, you will be able to develop a shortlist of 3 to 5 that you will proceed to the RFP process with. Often, two or three will rise immediately to the top following ranking and discussion—there may however be a pool of more “average” firms that need to be winnowed down to fill out the shortlist.

You will now have to notify those firms who have made it onto the shortlist—and you will need to inform those that were not selected. How you notify them is up to personal preference—in writing, email, or phone. I've done all three—typically notifying shortlisted firms via email, followed by formal letter in the mail. It's important to let the unsuccessful firms know they were not selected, as unpleasant as passing on the news may be. The firms have worked hard to submit their work to you; you owe it to them not to leave them hanging. On one occasion, I spoke with an unsuccessful vendor that told me I was the first potential client to deliver the bad news personally to him in nearly five years. Normally they just wait a few days past the deadline for notification and

then assume that they were not selected. Expect that some of those not selected will want to know why. You should be willing to give them some idea about why they were not selected. This feedback will be helpful for them during the next RFQ process they participate in.

### **Request for Proposal**

The second step allows you to make a final decision. The Request for Proposals asks the shortlisted firms to tell you what they will do, who on their staff will do it, how long they think it will take, and what it will cost (Gann, 1991)—it is essentially a way of “comparison” shopping (Freeman Companies, 2005). Every shortlisted firm answers the same questions, and thus the RFP should be a fair way to judge all firms and get the best firm (or firms) for your project.

Writing the RFP forces you to think through what you want done with some degree of completeness and specificity (Tooker, 2006). This helps prevent “scope creep” which both you and vendors should fear – they don't want to do work for free, and you don't want to get involved with being billed for additional services that were not anticipated initially.

### **RFP Components and Notes**

The RFP will duplicate some of what was in the RFQ. As with RFQ, the RFP should be concise. 15 to 20 pages, not including appendices, should suffice (Frain, 2003). Provide the shortlisted firms with as much information as you can to get the best possible responses—it's not a game for them to guess what you need!

- 1) Background of institution
  - institutional background
  - visitor profile

“I spoke with an unsuccessful vendor that told me I was the first potential client to deliver the bad news personally to him in nearly five years. Normally they just wait a few days past the deadline for notification and then assume that they were not selected.”

- goals/objectives
- 2) Project Description/Scope of Services
    - provide a basic indication and description of what the project is
    - mission, goals, objectives
    - set out expected deliverables
    - should provide enough information for vendors to make reasonable resource and costs estimates
    - this is harder for design work, less so for fabrication (you will provide a set of drawings from which they will work)
    - note that if you define these very tightly there is no room for a creative response or solution to your needs (Tooker, 2006)
    - expect that some firms will look for opportunities to offer additional services they feel will add to their chances of securing the project
    - be clear what your institution will provide—you don't want vendors developing a fee proposal that includes work that you will do (i.e. content development, text writing, etc)
  - 3) Budget
    - provide budget for services to be performed
    - Vendors will want to know, although you want the best deal you can get (Gould, 2005)
    - You can choose to not include it, but in that case the project requirements and scope will need to be very clearly set out
    - best to let them know what you are willing and able to spend, if only a range, to give them an opportunity to show what can be done in the range
    - clarify what is included and not included (for instance, maybe you have in-house graphic design for exhibit graphics—firms not needed to provide this)
  - 4) What format should the RFP be submitted in?
    - makes it easier to review and score them if you specify exactly how they should order and format their response
  - 5) Proposed personnel
    - insist vendors list who will work on the project, both from their firm and any consultants they might include
  - 6) Billing rates
  - 7) Approach to project
    - what will working with them be like?
    - what is their creative process, project management system, etc
  - 8) Related projects already completed
    - ask for 3 to 5 examples of work they have done in the past that is similar to your project
    - the limit is important; you don't need to see all their work
  - 9) Fee
    - allow vendors to state assumptions they made in developing fee proposal, including tradeoffs and compromises (Gould, 2005)
    - technical questions process will help sort this out ahead of time too
  - 10) Contact person for technical questions (include email, phone, fax, hours to contact, deadline for questions)
  - 11) References
    - ask for at least three
  - 12) Evaluation/selection criteria
    - only fair to tell vendors how you will judge them
  - 13) Confidentiality statement



“If you are only selecting based on price, then much of this process is pointless.”

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- let vendors know the information is proprietary and should not be shared with other vendors, institutions, etc
- 14) How many copies needed?
- ask for enough for the selection committees' use
  - be reasonable—don't ask for twenty or more copies

Again, provide sufficient time for the shortlisted firms to complete respond. Two weeks is a bare minimum (Frain, 2003). Three weeks or more is probably better. Expect that requests for a time extension if you do not initially allow enough time.

#### **Interview/Presentation**

Inviting shortlisted firms to make a presentation and interview directly with your selection committee is a good idea for projects of large scope (in excess of several hundred thousand dollars). For OSH, interviews were used, as the work for design and fabrication were in excess of \$ 1 million. Indicate your intention to conduct interviews within the RFP itself, and send shortlisted firms the date and times available under separate cover. Provide them the agenda for the session, including (Skalsky and Holland, 2005):

- How long will they have to present?
- How long for Q+A with the selection committee?
- Ask them if they will need any equipment (screen, LCD projector, etc).
- Tell them what they cannot bring or show.
- Suggest they limit the number of people they bring—three to five should be sufficient (principals, project manager, other key team members or sub-consultants such as a

multimedia firm)—and insist that they be the people who will actually be working on the project.

Limit the sessions to 60 or 90 minutes each, so you can fit them all in during one day. Make sure you leave time for breaks and lunch for the committee, too! Have the same people at all the interviews—and it's best if they are also the original selection committee. Ensure you have established ranking criteria before the interviews, and score each firm immediately after the interview so the work is done at the end of the day.

Setting up the interviews can be more difficult than anticipated. Most vendors will want to go later in the day due to travel constraints. You can go with a “first come first served” basis, or simply by setting them up in alphabetical order. Firms will make it work if they really want the job.

#### **Reference Checks**

Checking references is important (although no sensible firm would provide a reference to a project that went poorly...). As for other rankings, have a standard form that all will use to collect information. Divide up the shortlisted firms among the selection committee members to make the calls. You might want to do this after the interviews, but it can be done beforehand too. Checking with past clients will help you fill in any information that might be lacking following the interview (or provide information to ask during it). References may volunteer information that you do not ask about directly too, which may be helpful.

## Final Selection

As for the RFQ, every committee member should have individual scores for each firm following the interviews. The committee should then meet to compare scores and discuss them to make a final selection. Again, take notes and retain all ranking sheets. One or two firms may immediately rise to the surface, and others will probably fall aside. This can be a difficult process, and even with the rankings can be somewhat subjective. Price can play into this in a big way. If you are only selecting based on price, then much of this process is pointless. But if the prices proposed are essentially the same, then the intangibles of the rankings for each firm and interview provide good guides to making a final decision. It is a big decision, and if you have done the RFQ and RFP process as effectively as you could, you should be able to make a final selection that will serve you and your project well.

## Announcement

As for RFQ, you will need to inform the shortlisted firms of your decision. At this stage, a personal call to those that were interviewed might be in order rather than some other form of communication. The winners will be elated, those not chosen disappointed.

By this point, the shortlisted firms will have

invested a significant amount of time, effort, and money in trying to secure your project. Expect that firms not selected will want a debrief about why they were not chosen. They got so close and will want to know why, and what they can improve for future submissions to you and to other potential clients. Again, you owe it to them - they have done a significant amount of work on your behalf. Note that you may not be able to come to final contract terms with your first choice, and may need to terminate negotiations with them and move on to the second place finalist. Having a second choice that continues to think well of your organization will make this much easier!

## Conclusion

So, consider upcoming projects that might be suitable for an RFQ and RFP. If you expect to be procuring services for a large project in the future, it might make sense to get your feet wet beforehand with a more modest one. Of course, there is no guarantee that following this process will ensure a smooth, problem free project. The submission and interviews will only reveal so much about both parties – your team, and the selected vendor's team. Things can go awry once the selection is announced, a contract signed, and work begun. But, following this systematic process provides plenty of safeguards against that happening. ☀

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