

TO RFP OR NOT TO RFP

THAT IS THE QUESTION

Barbara Punt

As a project manager experienced in overseeing many types of exhibition projects, I often run selection processes for my museum clients, helping them to find the designers, fabricators, or other types of outside expertise they need.

Some clients, I've found, automatically assume they must use a Request for Proposals (RFP) to find the right firm.

They don't realize that there are alternative options for finding help, which may be better suited to their project. Drawing on my 20+ years of experience, in this article I share some observations about the benefits, drawbacks, and components of an RFP; discuss how firms perceive museum RFPs; and suggest some alternatives to the RFP process.

What Is an RFP?

An RFP is a document used when soliciting proposals from firms to complete a specific scope of work. It includes the project description, a sample contract, any mandatory qualifications which the firms would need to meet in order to be considered, and a list of questions to answer or elements to address in their responses.

It may be open to any firm and listed on an institution's website; or, it may be by invitation only, and sent directly to firms from which the museum would like to receive proposals. If it's by invitation only, it may or may not include the complete list of firms to which it's sent. Frequently, firms are required to register their interest with the museum before submitting a proposal, so they can receive any updates or additional information (for example, replies during a formal question and answer period).

Benefits and Drawbacks of Using an RFP

As a museum seeking the services of designers, fabricators, or other types of firms, you might use an RFP when:

- it's required by an institutional policy;
- it's required by an existing or potential funding source; and/or
- there is a strong perception by stakeholders or the community that it's required in order to provide transparent use of funds.

Some benefits of using an RFP are:

- when written and administered correctly, it provides a verifiable reason why individual(s) or firm(s) were awarded a contract;
- it can facilitate reviews by a selection committee that more heavily weighs an objective process (numerical ranking based on specified criteria) over broad discussion; and

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- the process encourages structure and accountability in terms of who gets involved in the selection process, at what points, and for how long.

Some drawbacks of using an RFP are:

- it's labor intensive and can be costly because of the number of steps

required, all of which take valuable staff and/or consultants' time;

- it often takes longer than simply reviewing various firms' portfolios or getting recommendations from colleagues; and
- it's a highly structured process and doesn't permit the kind of flexible decision-making that some institutions may prefer.

There are some circumstances when using an RFP is not necessary:

- when none of the conditions that require an RFP exist;
- when there is limited time to make a selection because taking any longer might cause other problems;
- when there is a clear consensus and/or reason to approach a particular firm (or firms) and no need to cast a wider net;
- when what you need is a bid, and not an annotated proposal.

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How Firms View RFPs

As a museum, it's helpful to understand how RFPs are perceived by those receiving them,

namely, individuals or firms you may want to hire. For them, receiving an RFP can be exciting – it signals a new project that either wasn't on their radar or broadcasts that a project is moving forward. That's particularly true if the RFP list is limited and the RFP is by invitation only. There is an inverse relationship between how many firms are invited and the chances are that you will get every firm on your wish list to submit a proposal.

Many well-regarded firms are busy enough with work they already have and aren't interested in using up internal resources on something they perceive to be a long shot. When they see an open call – especially when it includes a long list of firms invited to respond – they may calculate it's not worth their time if they think their chances for success are slim. It's a substantial amount of work to respond to an RFP, with no guarantee that it's money well spent. Because it may cost thousands of dollars in a firm's staff time to prepare a proposal, it's a business development decision whether to pursue projects which may have a large number of competitors – versus chasing different leads which may be less expensive to pursue and have a greater chance of success.

I believe that as a museum, it's advisable to tell firms who else is receiving the RFP. Not only is it polite, but it can work to your advantage. If a firm sees their biggest competitors on the list it may inspire them to respond. It will also give them an opportunity to clarify how they differ from other firms in ways you might not know. If they think they have a better chance than other names on the list, they may be more inclined to submit. And, they will certainly see you more favorably and be more interested in

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your future projects if they think you're fair and transparent in your dealings.

Museums don't always realize how much *they* are being judged during the selection process. It's human nature to gravitate towards people you perceive as being fair, kind, and collegial, and to avoid people who try your patience or your pocketbook by taking up more of your time than anticipated. Potential clients who broadcast disorganization, dysfunction, or indifference to polite standards will give firms pause before deciding to respond. Red flags include:

- unreasonable deadlines and/or insufficient turnaround time (a fair RFP process allocates weeks, not days, between notification and due dates for proposals);
- no advance notice when proposal preparation falls during a busy season

(such as during major conferences or national holidays);

- an ill-defined scope of the work;
- no clear list or requirements for what needs to be included in the proposals; and
- no point person to handle questions.

Alternatives to Using an RFP

One benefit of RFPs is that it forces museums to establish a budget, scope, and schedule before soliciting others to work with them. However, there are drawbacks to the RFP process (for both those issuing and those responding to RFPs). You can take those established budgets, scopes, and schedules and instead of issuing an RFP, utilize a more direct approach which might take less time, be less costly, and provide more flexibility in decision making.

Alternate ways of finding the right firm include the following (in order from most general to most specific):

- **Issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ).** An RFQ is a way of stating the institution's needs and the qualifications a firm must have in order to be considered. They are a convenient way for institutions to receive materials from lots of firms and should be written simply enough so firms don't have to invest a lot of time answering them. You might ask

about the firm's size, their general qualifications to complete the project at hand, and have them provide comparable projects which are similar enough in cost, size, or subject matter to give you an idea of their capabilities. As with RFPs, you can post an RFQ on the museum's website, and/or approach firms directly (see below).

- **Compile a short list of prequalified firms.** You can spend less time and get better information by looking at just a few firms in great depth than by looking at a large number of firms superficially. Speak to colleagues at institutions comparable to your own, or peers who have embarked on similar projects or faced similar challenges. This is a small and collegial field – how lucky we are to have this information at our fingertips! You can also post queries on museum listserves (e.g., AAM's <https://community.aam-us.org> or ASTC's <http://community.astc.org>), peruse articles and postings in the listserve's archives to see if others have written about related subjects, and research award-winning exhibits from AAM or smaller regional associations.
- **Hire less experienced professionals.** Have a modest budget? Consider speaking to colleges which teach the professionals the skills you need and contacting recent graduates, such as a college or university program in exhibition design. You might find qualified people who wouldn't come up

in a more routine search and/or who might charge less. Sometimes people and/or firms want a foot in the door and are so invested in your mission that they'll donate some of their time or discount their customary prices.

- **Do a trial run.** Some museums identify potential firms and try them out on a project with a small scope. Not sure of a firm's chemistry with your staff? Have them conduct a workshop or other limited project and see what happens. I know of one large institution that refers to this as *tranches* of work. They divide up an initial phase into small bundles and assign a different firm to each scope to test out firms' creativity and their compatibility with them.
- **Obtain bids.** Many RFP questions require narrative replies that may be unnecessary if you're handing over some drawings and need to know what it would cost to get something built. Compile a short list and send out a standardized bid sheet of what elements are included for apples-to-apples comparisons. For example, include all the smaller subcomponents of an individual exhibit to get a price on it (e.g., graphics, motors, fans, locks, access panels, etc.) so that you know that you're not going to get hit with extra charges later on for something one vendor didn't account for that another vendor may have included in their initial bid.

Components of a Good RFP

Should your museum choose to put out an RFP, I recommend the following:

- Provide a project description. Be sure to address whether funding is secured or not and/or when funding decisions should be made. For a firm, there's no joy in being awarded a potential contract that is dependent upon funding with an unspecific timeline. Many firms would opt out of submitting a proposal for a project whose funding is uncommitted, opting instead to submit proposals only for projects that have a reasonable likelihood of coming to fruition.
- Include an overall project schedule, highlighting important deadlines in the process. Include the question and answer period, pre-bid meeting, interview dates, and proposal due date. It can be helpful to have two due dates – one for digital submissions and a later one for physical copies of a proposal.

I should note that requesting physical copies is somewhat controversial (it costs firms money to produce and mail them, not to mention it's using resources to print and ship them), but I think there's a valid argument for requiring them. Proposals can run dozens of pages and if you rely solely on electronic submissions, reviewers who prefer to read something as long as a proposal on paper instead

of electronically have to invest considerable amounts of time (and paper and ink) to getting all the proposals printed. And for design proposals in particular, the print quality of the average person's printer is not nearly as good as what a design firm is liable to get printed and send as a submission. I think there's a distinct advantage for the firm submitting the proposal to have reviewers see a high-quality printed copy to make a good impression.

- List criteria for what makes a good submission.
- Define what the criteria are for a comparable project for reference. For example, would it be comparable in terms of budget, in terms of subject matter, in terms of square footage, and/or something else?
- Provide the budget for the scope of work – a description alone doesn't indicate the project size or expectations. Some institutions are afraid that by listing the project budget they may "leave money on the table" when it comes to negotiating fees. But simply by requesting a proposal, they've asked firms to spend their own time and money on spec work. Isn't it fair to let firms decide if it's worth it to them by indicating how much they might get in return? Fees are negotiated on actual projects with real project parameters, not guesses, so if you don't disclose

the project budget you've already signaled to potential firms that you'd rather play cat and mouse than be transparent and fair. So many other considerations go into establishing a fee (e.g., how much information and staff time the institution supplies, how many iterations of deliverables are required, the length of the time frame for deliverables, who will own the intellectual property of the final product, etc.) that thinking you're leaving money on the table by revealing the budget is shortsighted. Isn't it more helpful to know what services you'd be receiving for that fee?

- Don't *ever* ask for free design work, such as requiring firms to include sketches or suggestions as part of their proposal. I have been asked to do this by clients and have heard that various museum professional organizations have published policies about this, so I submitted queries to both the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the Association of Science–Technology Centers (ASTC) listserves seeking organizations' positions on this issue. I received an avalanche of replies and complaints about the practice, as well as helpful links to professional organizations' views about the ethics of requesting free design.¹ Not only is it unprofessional, it also runs counter to your goal. Clients benefit from being part of the conversation about what goes into an exhibition, and by requesting a firm to guess what you might want, you're

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grading them on their mind-reading abilities, not the originality of their ideas. If you want to get a measure of

1 The following websites clarify positions on spec work by a variety of professional organizations:

- "AIGA Position on Spec Work," *American Institute of Graphic Arts*, accessed December 4, 2018, www.aiga.org/position-spec.
- "What is AIGA's position on spec work? And how are ethical standards determined?," *American Institute of Graphic Arts*, accessed December 4, 2018, www.aiga.org/what-is-aigas-position-on-spec-work-and-ethical-standards.
- "Info for Businesses," *NO!SPEC*, accessed December 4, 2018, www.no-spec.com/info-for-businesses.
- "The Handbook of Architectural Design Competitions," *American Institute of Architects*, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://network.aia.org/committeedesign/viewdocument/the-handbook-of-architectural-design-competitions>.
- "36.600 Scope of Subpart," *General Services Agency of the United States Government*, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://www.acquisition.gov/far/html/Subpart%2036.6.html>.
- "NAME Ethics Statement," *American Alliance of Museums*, accessed December 4, 2018, www.name-aam.org/ethics.

a firm's creativity beyond viewing their existing projects, you might consider asking the firms you interview to devise a solution to a simple problem (the same exercise for each firm) and provide a stipend for doing so. The bigger the stipend, the more time they're likely to devote to the challenge. Be clear as to who owns the intellectual property from this exercise.

- Include the proposed contract. Intellectual property is addressed in contract negotiations, so a good RFP includes the proposed contract for the project. If it's impossible to supply the entire contract, include items which may be deal-breakers later on, such as any mandatory licenses required for people in the company (be they architectural, engineering, LEED certification, or the like), insurance requirements, likely union participation, restrictions on onsite work hours, if applicable (it may cost more to work after hours than it would to work 9 to 5), what costs are to be included within the contract sum (such as reimbursables), and most importantly, a complete list of what services and items will be included in the final scope of work. I once found out during an interview that I would have been responsible to hold contracts for a wide array of subcontractors which would have considerably increased my liability and insurance costs. Had they detailed that in the RFP, I would never have

responded and they wouldn't have had to waste their time reading my proposal and interviewing me.

Conclusion

Whether or not your museum uses an RFP for its next exhibition project, the vendor selection process is fraught with anxiety on both sides of the table. Did I hire the right firm? (*Was I right in accepting this contract?*) Did I get a good rate? (*Did I charge enough in fees to cover the unpredictable?*) Is this firm a good fit? (*Will they be a good client?*) The important thing to remember is that you and those you hire are working in concert with one another. A good partnership requires trust, and even the best contract in the world can't guarantee a successful project without trust in both directions.

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