

WRITING THE RFP

A request for proposal presents a library with a golden opportunity for solving some or all of its problems. The RFP doesn't just explain the library to vendors—it's a valuable tool for communication within the library, too. The RFP writer's task is to understand the functionality of the integrated library system (ILS) and apply it to the library's needs and mission.

At its best, an RFP helps a library obtain meaningful information for making purchase decisions. At its worst, an RFP yields canned responses brimming with sales-speak. The RFP is only one part in a dynamic purchase process that includes vendor demonstrations, site visits, and meetings—answers on paper cannot accurately convey the look, feel, and intuitiveness of a system.

For a quick, general tutorial on writing an RFP, consult www.internettraining.com/bart2.htm, or search for 'RFP' at TechSoup, a website that addresses the technology needs of nonprofit organizations. TechSoup's content is targeted toward small to medium-sized nonprofits—school or small public libraries are the most appropriate audience for this site.

This chapter discusses each step in the RFP writing process, focusing on ways to ask intelligent questions.

Making a statement

Although several staff members will contribute to the content of the RFP, the library's purchase team should appoint one person to write the first draft and final document. Working with a single writer ensures that the staff's varying specifications will be translated into a consistent format and language throughout the document.

As he or she begins the first draft, the writer should have materials gathered during the purchase planning process, including the final document from the library's needs assessment, as well as any goal or problem statements. These agreed-upon goals serve as the backbone for the entire purchase, as well as making the task of writing the RFP easier.

In addition to stated goals, the writer also should begin with a clear picture of the library's priorities: what does the library want to accomplish with this purchase, and at what cost? Which library operations cannot be affected or inhibited by the new system? The writer, as well as the entire purchase team, must share a vision of which procedures and workflows may change and what systems cannot change.

By this point, the purchase committee has already held several staff meetings to discuss the upcoming RFP and system purchase. As the purchase team and the writer prepare for the RFP, however, they should appoint representatives from different library units to discuss particular problems or areas for improvement in their units. Some of these concerns may already be addressed in the library-wide goals statement, but others may be unique to certain units. The writer and each representative should work together to develop system specifications for his or her unit.

TechSoup,
www.techsoup.com

During the initial draft process, the RFP writer should stay in close contact with unit representatives, as well as technical staff, administrators, purchasing officers, and contract specialists. The RFP is developed in concert with all these personnel, and the writer must adequately address their concerns in the finished document. To accurately represent each department, frequent—but not constant—communication is necessary.

As the writer drafts the first version of the RFP, questions will invariably arise about the particular specifications of each library unit, but refrain from bombarding library staff with dozens of individual inquiries. Instead, the writer should schedule a regular appointment each week (or every few days) for addressing his or her questions with pertinent staff members.

This approach will further convince staff that the RFP writing effort is organized. Staff will be happy to answer a set of questions at regular intervals and will budget time accordingly. (For most people, receiving one e-mail message with eight questions every Thursday afternoon is preferable to receiving eight e-mail messages with one question each throughout the week.) Limiting RFP-related queries to designated periods also helps the writer track which questions have been answered, and when—eliminating the need to ask the same question twice.

At this point in the preparations, the RFP writer and members of the purchase team should issue internal guidelines regarding contact between staff and vendor personnel before, during, and after the RFP is issued. Once word gets out (as it invariably will) that your library is assembling an RFP, expect unsolicited contact from some vendors' sales representatives.

When issuing an open RFP, the library must carefully monitor its contact with vendors to avoid compromising the open RFP process—if a library appears to favor a vendor or if the open RFP seems to explicitly specify one vendor's system, another vendor may challenge the legality of the open RFP process.

Although such instances are rare, a vendor is legally permitted to seek punitive damages against the library. A set of clear ground rules ensures that all communication between vendors and library staff is well-documented and fully aboveboard.

Evaluation criteria

Before drafting the RFP, the writer and the library purchase team must establish criteria and methodology for evaluating vendor proposals. A solid evaluation plan should contain:

- An explanation of how criteria are weighted
- A description of the library's methodology
- An explanation of the finalist selection process
- Requirements for any demonstrations to follow
- Any requirements for site visits and contact with a vendor's current customers
- A list of minimum conditions that must be met for consideration of a product

In assigning weight to criteria, proceed carefully. The criteria should faithfully reflect the library's priorities (as established during needs assessment or

in goal statements). All too often, evaluation criteria are weighted heavily on the most arcane or difficult specifications in an RFP.

Choose what really matters to your library. If the library's first priority is to provide remote patron authentication without disturbing other systems, the most heavily weighted criteria should reflect that. Don't give weight to system attributes that are of little importance to your library—a problem that frequently arises when libraries copy boilerplates used by another institution.

A description of the library's evaluation methodology should include an explanation of the point system the library uses (if any) to tabulate answers and any other information that goes into the process of comparing responses. If your RFP includes open-ended questions that do not result in yes-or-no-type responses, thoroughly explain how those responses will be assessed and included in any point totals.

If you plan to use open-ended or short essay-style questions in your RFP, consult the library's attorney or purchasing officer after drafting your library's methodology statement to ensure that the evaluation method is legally solid. The easiest way to evaluate essay-style responses is to assign point values to responses and include a brief schema that explains what constitutes each point value (for example, a short essay-style response that receives one point out of five fulfills only one of five possible requirements).

As any attorney will attest, using strict, numerically based methods of evaluation (such as scorecards) removes the possibility for ambiguity or bias. Such concerns primarily affect public institutions, which frequently operate under rigid government-mandated procurement processes.

The finalist selection process, in which the library chooses which vendors will be invited to demonstrate their system, also should be based on the numerical outcomes of the RFP evaluation. Many libraries state that the three vendor responses with the largest point totals will automatically be considered finalists.

Demonstration, site visit, and customer contact requirements also should be carefully prepared. Think about how much time to give vendors for demonstrations, whether you wish to provide vendors with a demonstration checklist beforehand, and which vendor personnel you want to participate in the site visit.

Minimum requirements usually indicate a certain percentage of the RFP specifications that must be met (95% is common) for a system to warrant the library's consideration. The library also can list certain basic functions (for example, a circulation module) that must be present in any considered system.

Tips for writing the RFP

Are we there yet?

As the writing process begins in earnest, scan the Web to see what's out there—many libraries post their system RFPs online (start with the list in Chapter 3). Read through available requests to see what approaches are used and which ones your library should emulate.

Contacting several similar libraries through phone or e-mail should yield a handful of RFPs to look through.

For more precise research, use Marshall Breeding's lib-web-cats searchable database at www.librarytechnology.org, where you can search for libraries whose size and type match your own.

A caveat before you copy and paste

After absorbing a few RFPs, one thing will be clear—there's a lot of boilerplate out there. Although you may be tempted to copy another RFP wholesale, don't. Vendors have seen the boilerplate, and bid writers can respond to it in their sleep. If you want a vendor's product to help achieve the unique goals or address the special concerns of your library, then write a unique, original RFP.

After you collect information and are overwhelmed by the size of the task at hand, take a breath (or a coffee break). Remember, your library's RFP doesn't have to be tedious. The RFP is an opportunity to find solutions to library problems or to improve your library's service, workflow, or effectiveness.

After establishing basic functional requirements, an RFP can pose challenging, interesting questions. Even if your library is limited by strict rules governing procurement and purchasing, you can combine standard RFP specifications with provocative questions. Speak with your library's procurement officer to find out how much flexibility you have in the document.

Some notes on language

Because an RFP is a legally binding document, and because it specifies precise needs and functions, an RFP must be carefully worded. Follow these tips before you begin writing:

- **Use all-or-nothing terms sparingly.** Words such as *must* have especially heavy legal weight and should be used infrequently. Terms such as *highly desirable* or *should* are far less legally problematic and will convey your point nonetheless.
- **Require vendors to respond specifically**—relating how their system will operate in *your* library when describing the library environment and workflow. Responses should explicitly address your library's technical platforms, operating systems, and telecommunications interfaces.
- **Tell vendors about your library and ask how their systems will perform** throughout the RFP. Many RFPs consist exclusively of declarative statements, giving a vendor few chances, if any, to explain how its product may be especially suited to your library's needs.
- **Avoid ambiguity.** Each specification should be clear. If you are unsure how to word some specifications, check with any appropriate unit representatives. Make sure you're asking for what you really want.
- **Avoid copying** another institution's RFP wholesale. Not only will a copied RFP fetch unoriginal responses, but many consultants copyright RFPs that they have created. To avoid copyright infringement and numerous other ills, use other RFPs as guides only, customizing your request to your library's needs.
- **Resist your inner Charlton Heston.** A handy rule of thumb as you write the RFP: if a specification reads like something Moses may have found etched on stone tablets (for example, "the vendor shall not be considered viable in the event of the following conditions forthwith"), rewrite it.

Introduction and scope

The first part of the RFP introduces your library and its mission. The scope of the RFP tells vendors which goals the library hopes to attain by implementing a new system. Begin writing a quick narrative sketch of your library (since this is the first draft, you can revise later). Try to convey basic facts of the library—its size, holdings, user population, major activities—in 300 words or less.

Make sure to include any library functions that are particular to your library (for instance, if the library has the largest special collections department in your state).

The introductory section should also include a clear explanation of how responses will be evaluated (covered earlier in this chapter), deadlines and instructions for bids, and a short description of the library's contract practices.

Defining the scope of the RFP not only takes the library's broad concerns into account but also sets basic parameters for the planned system purchase. This section tells vendors what the library expects from the system purchase. One technique for writing this part of the RFP answers the following questions:

- **Who?** Present the basic information about the library and its users, as indicated above.
- **What?** Discuss what the library wants to accomplish with the proposed system, and state the basic functionality that is sought.
- **When?** Provide a rough timetable for implementation, including beta and acceptance testing.
- **Where?** Indicate where the library wants to see improvements—such as better workflow and design features or an easier patron interface. Also describe the size of the library's database, where it is hosted, who owns the content, and any expectations for growth.
- **Why?** Explain the changes or problems that predicate the search for a new system.
- **How?** Specify any deliverables (such as CD-ROMs or customizable websites), as well as basic technical configurations.

Several other basic considerations are briefly discussed in these first sections of the RFP. For a complete listing of what to include, see the description of the model RFP in Chapter 3 of this report.

Developing smart specifications

"There are no systems out there that don't check out a book, so why are we still asking whether they do?"

—Susan Baerg-Epstein, library consultant.
(Telephone conversation, March 23, 2003)

Several years ago, the multitudes of functional requirements in an RFP actually *did* something—not every system had the full complement of functions and features, and these requirements allowed libraries to assess which systems had the largest amount of desired functionality.

These copious requirements also were used to dare vendors into developing something—RFPs were, in part, libraries' wish lists for features and functions. These wish list functions were used to drive system development. Libraries asked for features several times, in hopes that a vendor would finally bite.

In the current library system marketplace, where all systems have nearly identical, fairly robust basic functionality, virtually every system can satisfy basic functional requests. The sharpest differences between systems are generally found in each system's approach (including information and database architecture), look and feel, ease of use, and intuitiveness.

The vintage-style RFP is useful for libraries that have not yet automated their catalog, or for libraries that have not updated their automated system for 10 years or more. For all other libraries (which are likely more familiar with the state of library system functionality), such a grandiose effort is not necessary. This section suggests efficient ways to construct listings of functional requirements.

Checklists

If the library's purchase team has thoroughly researched the current ILS marketplace, the team members will almost certainly have come to the same conclusion: nearly all ILS products meet all basic requirements for functionality.

If your library's procurement rules permit, listing functional requirements in a checklist is a recommended and efficient strategy for affirming basic attributes of systems. By using a checklist as part of the RFP, the bid writers' jobs are simplified—they can instead focus their energies on responding to the substantial questions in the RFP. Bear in mind, however, that checklists should only be used for baseline functions—features common to all vendors' ILS products.

If your library's procurement rules limit the use of checklists in RFPs, developing specifications in checklists for the first draft can be useful. The specifications in checklists should be short and clearly written, with no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation.

After circulating the first draft of the RFP with checklists, the writer can be sure that he or she has accurately conveyed the library's functional needs. Once that draft is approved, the RFP writer can translate each checklist item into the approved format for individual specifications.

Many libraries that send out RFPs with checklists send them out in Microsoft Excel or other spreadsheet formats. If all you send is a checklist, the format would be fine—chances are, however, that the checklists will be combined with meatier requests for vendor input. Spreadsheet formats create headaches for bid writers, who must tweak the spreadsheet to fit in long answers to questions.

Sending an RFP in two portions (for example, one in Microsoft Word, the other in Excel) or inserting a table into a Word document saves time as well as effort. When choosing a format for the RFP, keep it simple. Ask whether you'd rather the bid writer spend his or her time manipulating spreadsheet cells to squeeze in responses or actually *writing* thoughtful responses.

How to ask smart questions

Above all, be specific about what the library wants to know. Clearly explain the library's workflows and connect questions about system functionality to their role in the library environment. By tailoring the questioning to the library's needs and concerns, you'll force vendors to tailor their responses in kind.

Know your library's strengths—what systems should not change as the new ILS is adopted? If certain systems cannot be disturbed, ask vendors to explain *how* their ILS can operate around or in harmony with the library's crucial processes and systems, and not just *whether* their ILS can co-operate.

Most questions about existing systems concern the information technology (IT) department. Find out what the technical staff needs to know about the underlying architecture to properly evaluate vendor responses.

In the same vein, the RFP writer must have (or must develop) a good working knowledge of how IT systems work in the library in order to ask intelligent questions. In composing the RFP, the writer should have diagrams or basic documents from the IT department so that the specifications make sense to the writer and result in clear statements.

Scenarios

The use of scenarios in RFPs has become increasingly popular, but be judicious in their use. Scenarios give the library a rich picture of a system in action and allow greater insight into how systems operate than do simple yes or no questions.

All too often, however, scenarios merely ask questions that the library will ask again during a vendor's product demonstration. If the question seeks to actually see the system, put it aside for any demonstration scripts that will be developed.

In addition, RFP writers frequently pose overly specific scenarios. A poorly written scenario asks something like: A professor and a student place a hold on a book from different remote locations at the exact same time. To whom does the system give the hold, and how does it convey the appropriate messages?

In all likelihood, the vendor will explain that the server accepts requests in hundredths of a second, so such simultaneous situations are virtually impossible. But the library really wanted to know whether and how the system gives priority to certain users and how ensuing notification works.

Well-written scenarios allow the vendor to explain its system and why it's ideal for your library. Scenarios should describe expected events—power outages, lost records, conflicting hold requests—not freak occurrences. Stay focused on obtaining meaningful information from scenarios, and resist the temptation to make vendors squirm and scramble to find answers for next-to-impossible (and next-to-meaningless) questions.

Avoiding pitfalls

The task of writing and issuing a successful RFP is not terribly complex or difficult, but does call for careful planning and sensible, specific requirements. The following list discusses the most common pitfalls in the RFP writing process:

- **Not enough time is spent on vendor education.** Not all vendors are created equal. A vendor's greatest fear is that a solution has already been chosen [by the institution] and that it is wasting its time. This [situation] manifests itself when the RFP inadvertently favors a technology or solution because the team had the most education on that particular technology.
- **Poorly defined requirements.** This [problem] is typically due to two basic reasons. First, see the item above. Second, not enough time is spent understanding and documenting the [institution's] internal requirements... requirements are so broadly stated as to be meaningless to a vendor.

A recent RFP requested that the [system] support output to different formats and devices. When questioned [by the vendor] as to what was meant, the buyer compounded the mistake by requiring that the [system] support not only current formats, but also any future formats that may be developed within the industry! ("Wow, so I might as well file for Chapter 11 right now and get it over with," said one would-be vendor respondent.)

- **Poor coordination among key stakeholders.** Did you forget to bring in the test group until after the contract was awarded? In one RFP, much time was spent on describing developers, administrators, the IT department, but almost no time was spent describing the actual users of the system—the people who would use the system to obtain the information they needed.

When vendors questioned the RFP team about the "users of the system" the RFP team could not adequately define who a user was, what a user would do on the system, how many users there were, how many hits were expected, what the average length of time spent on the site would be, and so forth. In their haste to completely define the "solution," the RFP team forgot the audience.

- **Providing requirements that can't be adequately defined and therefore proposed.** This [problem] typically involves using [ambiguous or impossible] requirement statements...[another] common mistake is to require something like "all products should conform to all AIIM content management standards..." Without defining the specific standard or set of standards, many vendors will be absolutely clueless as to which standards they meet and which ones they don't meet. (Hence this typical response: "Oh, to hell with it, say we meet them all—they'll never check anyway.")

Given ambiguous or unclear requirements, most vendors will simply say yes, and if questioned will bring out all the issues involved and make the matter so complex that it will never be resolved. This method is in the spirit of "better to beg forgiveness than ask permission," because once a vendor has been selected...little chance [exists] that they will be unselected.

(Text excerpted from "The Case for RFPs (When done right...)," by Bud Porter-Roth. Published by Content Management System Watch, May 14, 2002, at www.cmswatch.com)

Tips from bid writers

Poorly written RFPs don't just hurt libraries, they also tarnish the working lives of vendor bid writers, the staff charged with responding to RFPs. Generally speaking, bid writers don't like responding to age-old boilerplates any more than libraries like writing them.

No one wants to prevent the library from receiving the information it seeks. All too often, the library just needs to learn to ask questions more carefully.

Nicole Lemley-Rautama, bids and marketing coordinator with Ex Libris (USA), gives these four suggestions:

- **The cost of producing paper RFP responses** is incredible. One binder alone can cost more than \$5. Multiply that by the requisite five copies, add printing and tab costs, shipping, and several responses in one year and the cost is immense. Although we ostensibly provide these copies free for libraries, the cost is built in somewhere—in software, maintenance, and so on. Let's explore alternative formats for RFP delivery. CD-ROMs are inexpensive to produce and ship.
- **Standards, and "standards."** Standards compliance is a complex issue, much more so than simply ticking yes or no to a question such as, "Do you comply with Z39.50?" There's a matter of complying with all variations of Z39.50, not just one portion which enables a vendor to say yes. Not only should libraries care about standards compliance, but how it is accomplished and to what depth. How is the vendor involved in standards creation and compliance?
- **Bidder's conferences.** We don't want them eliminated, but we'd like to see them become telephone conferences. These on-site conferences take an enormous amount of time, effort, and money (once again that ultimately comes from the libraries' pockets) to attend said meetings, which sometimes last no more than 30 minutes.
- **Libraries, please include an electronic copy**—in word processing format, most usually MS Word, of your RFP. This RFP will become the basis, in turn, for our response. Answers will be integrated into the original document, and the original will be saved separately, unscathed. This format makes the vendor's response that much more efficient.

Bid writers and marketing personnel from Endeavor and GIS Information Systems (formerly Gaylord Information Systems) contributed the following tips for improve the library RFP experience. (Data collected through phone interviews March through May 2003)

- "We see a *lot* of overkill regarding standards. Z39.50 and MARC 21 are included. Stop asking about them."

Lots of space is consumed in the RFP by specifying, standard by standard, what a system should support. To save time and space, list the standards the system should comply with. The overwhelming majority of libraries seek support for the exact same standards, which are all included in virtually every ILS. Allow a vendor space to indicate or

explain why a particular standard is not supported. (Here's one way to phrase the question: Does your system include support for all the following standards? If not, please identify and explain.)

- "If you're working with a consultant, insist on originality in the RFP. After all, you're paying for it."

Many library consultants have been using the same RFPs for years, and bid writers can easily identify the boilerplates of different consultants. If an RFP has been past the vendor often enough, the bid department already has an MS Word document with the answers, and writer plugs them right in.

- "Don't ask us to explain how we plan to support your hardware environment and expect the response to fit in a spreadsheet cell."

Libraries often require vendors to format their responses in complicated and strange ways. Such format requirements are understandable for public institutions, whose state or government authorities maintain rigid styles for procurement documents, but in other cases, a library's formatting requests seem somewhat arbitrary. Nonetheless, says one bid writer, "We jump through the hoops. We have to."

- "If you want a thoughtful response, then give us time to think."

Provide ample time in which to prepare a good bid response. Thirty days should be the minimum turnaround; 45 is preferable. Bid writers observe that many RFPs arrive with seven- to 14-day turnarounds, and note that providing a high-quality response in such a limited time is extremely difficult.

- "Don't ask for the moon unless you're at least somewhat sure we offer it as an option."

If you're willing to spend the money on a product, develop a realistic idea of what it can do. This problem mainly arises in RFPs for new products such as portals or federated search systems. Librarians who send RFPs for these products frequently haven't learned enough about the products as a class. The RFP is intended to gain specific information about a specific type of product, but do due diligence first: find out, in a general way, what's out there.

Vendors receive pie-in-the-sky proposals with wild expectations—a clear sign to the vendor that you don't know what you want. As a result, the vendor is less likely to take you seriously. In these bids, writers spend a lot of time discussing the realities of the systems and what's possible today. Recognize that anything may be possible in the future, but first address what's possible now.

- "Know what you want."

The greatest barrier to a good RFP is that libraries send out bid boilerplates without placing priorities on the functions they want, which is especially true of libraries that work with consultants. A library should know what it's asking for, and it should be sure that every specification in the RFP is something it cares about.

Libraries often copy other RFPs wholesale from another source, but the copied RFP may contain specifications that matter little to the library. When a vendor doesn't support some of those specifications, the library eliminates a vendor based on something it didn't need—resulting in a doubly bad

situation because the library may have eliminated the most suitable vendor, and it may end up paying for something superfluous.

Every question is important in terms of inclusion and exclusion of potential vendors. At the start of the process, the library should be inclusive—you don't want to unnecessarily eliminate a product that might be an excellent match.

The vendor may not bid at all on your project if it can't meet all your specifications. If you've specified something of little to no importance to the library and several vendors can't live up to it, the library will have fewer options to choose from.

Bid writers also contributed a few tips that require little explanation:

- Include the due date and time clearly at the beginning of the proposal.
- Provide a clear, complete address for delivery—not a P.O. box (FedEx and other rapid couriers do not deliver to P.O. boxes)
- Clearly define how many copies of the response are needed and in what format.
- Specify for what period of time the proposal must be valid (preferably in the pricing section).
- Provide an electronic version of the RFP in an editable format; Microsoft Word is preferred.
- Ask for something once, and only once. Many RFPs arrive with a considerable duplication of requirements, slowing the response process.

