

Certification & Procurement: Mind the Details!

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Be sure to respond thoroughly with all requested information when seeking a government contract.

By Trish Kness

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), also known as the stimulus bill, has opened up opportunities for small companies in new areas.

The key to a successful bid is to understand how to respond to a government request for proposal (RFP).

Understand the Basics

Government regulations require all bidders to be informed of the criteria used to award a contract. RFP responses can only be evaluated against the stated criteria, and the evaluators can only consider information provided in the proposal. The only exception in which additional information can be added and considered is if your company has done work with the requesting agency in the past. Then you are allowed to reference your past performance.

Federal RFPs must comply with the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR), which define how the RFP is structured, how the bids must be announced, etc. Government RFPs contain more information about how the proposal is to be formatted, evaluation criteria that will be used and a clearly defined statement of work. Commercial RFPs don't have to address this information.

Government and commercial RFPs can look very much alike, however. The real difference is in how you respond to them. Government proposals must be strictly compliant, and there is no room for negotiation on deadlines. Commercial RFPs are often more flexible and have fewer rules to follow than government RFPs.

Bid or No Bid Decision

Analyze the RFP and make sure you identify every requirement and every action required.

Do not miss an opportunity to "play" by not responding to every requested action item. The government will not call and give you a second chance to "fill in the blanks." Respond to every requirement, no matter how simple or obvious it appears. Provide the government every piece of information requested.

Next, ask yourself some really tough questions:

- Can my company do the work and do we have the experience to deliver?
- Should we be the prime contractor or subcontractor?
- As prime contractor, can my company do all the work, meet all the requirements and deliver on time? Do we have the right resources to perform the work, or do we identify a partner to complement my company?
- If we're a subcontractor, how will my company work with the prime contractor?
- Will this work be profitable to my company?

Consider developing a standard process for making the bid or no bid decision, and use it each time you consider bidding on an RFP.

Once you decide to bid, it's time to select the proposal team. This team should be your best people, not simply those who can be spared from other work. Assign one person from the proposal team to administer all communications internally and externally.

Plan, plan and Plan Some More

Work backward from the proposal due date and build your proposal schedule. Make sure you leave plenty of time to deliver your proposal. Communicate the schedule to all proposal team members and stick to the plan.

As part of the plan, keep the following in mind:

- Planning is key, but don't overdo planning instead of the job.
- Determine who is going to write the proposal.
- Ensure the proposal team understands the requirements, evaluation factors and proposal instructions.
- Decide how to allocate time and resources by using the RFPs evaluation criteria as your guide.
- Consider using style guides to make sure you come out with a consistent format for your proposal.
- Respond per the instructions of the RFP.
- Do some research and find resources with the purpose of helping you win the business.

Opportunities for Small Companies

When writing a proposal to the RFP, put your best foot forward the first time and every time. Do not assume your company will be given an opportunity to fine-tune the proposal or to have a discussion with the contracting officer.

If you carefully think through the requirements when planning your response to an RFP, you can expect better results—as long as you can do the work on time and on budget.

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