

How to Write Proposals and Respond to RFPs

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INTRODUCTION. Knowing how to effectively respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP) is a make-or-break skill for small, minority- and women-owned businesses. RFPs are prepared when an organization needs a product and/or service. The RFP package contains such items as the:

- Statement of Work
- Product Specification(s)
- Bid Schedule
- Proposal Evaluation (Scoring) Criteria
- Contract Terms and Conditions
- Proposal Preparation Instructions
- Representations and Certifications

RFPs vary considerably in size ranging from a few pages to over 100 pages. Buyers usually allow prospective sellers about a month to respond to a RFP. With the Internet, more buying organizations are putting their RFPs online, e.g., www.FedBizOpps.gov. This helps makes them easier to find.

WORK BREAKDOWN STRUCTURE. The WBS is a detailed outline of the services and/or products to delivered under the proposed contract. This is tool primarily used by buyers and project managers to prepare a RFP. The WBS makes it easier to organize and price contract services and deliverables.

An example WBS format is provided below:

Database Installation Project

- 1) Software
 - a. Microsoft Access
 - b. SQL
 - c. Anti-Virus
- 2) Hardware
 - a. Network Server
 - b. Power Cables
 - c. Connector Cables
- 3) Database Loading
 - a. Computer Disk of Current Database
 - b. Convert Database to SQL Format
 - c. Load Database
 - d. Transfer Check
 - e. Load New Database Software
 - f. Testing
- 4) User Guide
 - a. Administrator Edition
 - b. User Version

The work breakdown structure is a widely-used tool. The author recommends using the WBS to write down and organize all the services and/or deliverables in the RFP. Using the WBS helps make sure you don't overlook anything when you prepare your bid / proposal. This is important since one of the fastest ways to get kicked out of the bidding is to submit an incomplete proposal. The WBS helps avoid this.

COMPLIANCE MATRIX. After making a WBS, the next step is to prepare a compliance matrix. The compliance matrix tells the buyer how your company will respond to every item in the RFP.

An example of a compliance matrix is provided below:

RFP Task	Your Company's Response	Assumptions
1) Software		
a. Buy Software	Will Buy from XYZ Vendor	Remove Old Software
b. Install New Software	Will Install of Web Server	Transfer License to Client
2) Hardware		
a. Upgrade Existing Computer	Will Upgrade Existing Servers	Client will Provide All Access Codes and Data Mfg. Warranty Applies
b. Power Couplings	Will Buy from ABC Supplier	Cable Change Only
3) Database Loading		
a. Computer Disk of Current Database		Client Will Provide Files
b. Convert Database to SQL Format	Convert to ascii Format	Subcontracted Task
c. Load Database	Use FTP Software	
d. Transfer Check	Verify Information Transfer	Subcontracted Task
e. Load New Database Software	Install Files & Check Installation	Provided by Client
4) User Manual		
a. User Version	Paper and Electronic Format	Client Will Provide Local Procedures
b. Administrator Edition	Electronic Format	OEM Manuals Included
5) Representations & Certifications		
a. MBE / WBE Certifications	Submit M/WBE Certification	Certification(s) Still Valid
b. Responses to RFP "Boilerplate" (Section K – Reps & Certs)	Complete Accompanying Form, e.g., Tax ID, M/WBE Status, DUNS #, etc.	Will All Submit Past Performance Data

BID – NO BID DECISION. *Deciding when to bid or not to bid on a contract is an important step. Below are some key questions you should ask:*

1. Is there sufficient time to prepare a proposal?
2. Does my company (and its subcontractors / partners) have the capacity to do the work?
3. Are the profit margins reasonable?
4. Is there an incumbent contractor? If so, how strong a hold do they have on the contract?
5. Do you have the resources (staff and money) to prepare a proposal?

PROPOSAL WRITING TIPS. Below are some key tips for writing a proposal:

1. Prepare a compliance matrix – make sure you respond to all requirements mentioned in the RFP.
2. Remember important requirements (tasks and deliverables) may be scattered through the RFP. Use the compliance matrix to capture them and then group them.
3. Don't hesitate to send questions to the buyer if you don't understand the RFP. It's better to ask than guess what you think the buyer wants.
4. Don't paraphrase (parrot back) the RFP. Buyers want to see your solutions to their needs.
5. Have a technical and cost strategy. Write the technical proposal first, then the cost proposal.
6. You need to explain how your organization / project team will be able to accomplish all contract requirements. Use diagrams and flow charts to help explain this.
7. Understand how your proposal will be scored. Grading systems vary; however, the most common is a numerical rating / score (see Section M for federal government RFPs).
8. Add a "Why Our Company is Different" section to your proposal to help differentiate your firm and get extra points.
9. Writing proposals can take a lot of time and work. This means you should start writing the proposal as soon as possible. Set a proposal preparation schedule – and stick to it.
10. Designate a proposal preparation team writer / leader. Assign people to prepare various parts of the proposal, e.g., quality plan, production schedule, cost estimate, etc.
11. Get an independent team to review the quality of your proposal (this is referred to as a "Red Team")
12. Put your proposal in a notebook. Use tabs to separate the major sections. Make it easy to read and understand. (Note: Buyers tend to read the well-organized proposals first, which helps your chances of making a good impression and getting more evaluation points).

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