

# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — The RFP Process ... A Book Vendor's Musings

by **Mark Kendall** (National Sales Director, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229)

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 800-258-3774 x. 3251; Fax: 603-746-5628) <[rnardini@ybp.com](mailto:rnardini@ybp.com)>

In varying degrees, I've had the opportunity to be involved in the **RFP (Request for Proposal)** response process at **YBP** since 1995. Over the years I've seen **RFPs** from libraries take shape in numerous formats ranging from one-page questionnaires (often referred to as **RFIs — Request for Information**) to hundred-page, multi-section, chock-full of "legalese" documents. Despite the varying formats, one constant remains: a desire on the part of the **RFP**-issuing institution for a thorough written vendor proposal addressing specifically how the vendor will meet the specified service needs of the library.

While there is ample practical and helpful information available today for institutions regarding how to write and evaluate an effective **RFP**, one area that often gets less attention, and might otherwise prove interesting to libraries, is what goes on behind the scenes at the vendor in preparing to respond to an **RFP**. In most instances, the vendor's **RFP** response is the culmination of many hours of work by numerous individuals and departments. Naturally, depending on the type of vendor, whether it be a book, journals or integrated library systems vendor, the approach to responding to the **RFP** will vary dramatically.

It should be noted upfront that just as the **RFP** is a critical document for the issuing institution in selecting the right vendor for a particular service, it is equally important for the financial health of any vendor that, based on its ability to deliver the requested services, chooses to respond. A well-thought-out, organized **RFP** response and proposal demands substantial hours of vendor staff time for research and preparation. Whether or not a bidding vendor is ultimately awarded the institution's business, the cost to the vendor in terms of materials (assembling exhibits, paper, shipping) and staff time can often run into a significant expense. More important, though, is the financial impact on the vendor, positive or negative, that rides on whether or not the vendor is awarded the institution's business. For example, if a vendor knows that it has been awarded a significant amount of new business by an institution via the **RFP** process, the anticipated revenue from this new business can be used to justify the cost of new product or service development. The opposite can hold true as well, for if a vendor experiences a string of **RFP** "losses", the vendor may be forced to re-think the development or introduction of new services. Obviously, the need for the vendor to put its best foot forward with a thorough and well written **RFP** response

has high stakes for both the **RFP** author and responder.

Once the **RFP** is received by the vendor, the process of assessing how, or whether, the vendor will respond begins. First, the vendor must consider several important questions. Among them: Are the services the bidding institution is seeking consistent with the vendor's service competencies? What are the determining factors the **RFP**-issuing institution will consider in which one or multiple vendors will be selected (price, service, vendor innovations, references)? Does the institution intend to issue a single vendor award (sole source) or award the business to multiple vendors? What are the estimated annual expenditures

to be expected from the institution, should the vendor be awarded the business? Another area vendors often scrutinize is how questions are worded. There are instances where the way certain **RFP** questions are posed might preclude a vendor from bidding. An example of such wording would include a question indicating that a particular vendor offering is "required" as opposed to "preferred" or "desired." A vendor could easily conclude that an inability to offer the "required" item would eliminate the vendor from consideration and thus discourage submission of an **RFP** response. Lastly, and perhaps the most important vendor consideration, should it be awarded the business/contract, will it be profitable? Should the vendor be selected, will the resulting relationship with the institution be a "win/win" scenario for both parties? Ensuring customer satisfaction and vendor profitability are both critically important. Based on these considerations, and others too numerous to mention, a vendor may decide to issue a "no bid" response to the **RFP**. This response would be submitted to the bidding authority (generally the institution's purchasing department or library) usually stating the reason for declining to bid.

Once a decision has been made by the vendor to respond to an **RFP**, the vendor often takes a holistic approach to crafting a response. A central point person (the bid administrator) assumes responsibility for organizing the response, assembling exhibits that support responses to questions, providing references and ensuring that the response is prepared and delivered on schedule. Supporting the bid administrator is a team of "specialists" who help formulate responses to **RFP** questions based on their areas of expertise. For example, an **RFP** that includes questions pertaining to monographic serials would require the input of the Serials/Continuations manager. Similarly, an

**RFP** that requests that the vendor state its technical service capabilities (cataloging, physical processing) would need to draw input from the internal specialist(s) in these areas. Once this information is collected by the administrator (and this can require several face-to-face meetings), the information is plugged into the **RFP** response. Vendors try to be careful not to introduce their own internal terminology or acronyms into their responses as some of the same verbiage may be used already within the institution with differing connotations.

So what can **RFP**-issuing institutions do to help vendors deliver a complete and well-thought-out proposal? First of all, recognizing that Purchasing departments are integral parts of the institutional bid process, it is important to remind Purchasing that librarians are purchasing a service, not a good. This is made clear in **Frances Wilkerson's** and **Connie Capers Thornson's** terrific book, *The RFP Process-Effective Management of the Acquisition of Library Materials* (Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1998). Full service vendors prefer to have the opportunity to be evaluated on their ability to offer solutions and services that address the library's needs rather than to be evaluated primarily on price.

One recent trend worth noting is the shortened length of time vendors are provided to respond to **RFPs**. Ideally, a vendor should be permitted a minimum of 30 to 45 days (or more) to prepare and submit an **RFP** response from the date the vendor receives the **RFP**. A recent sampling of **RFP** due dates required written vendor responses within two to three weeks of the **RFP's** issue date (usually the mailing or Web posting date of the document). Such a limited timeframe does not permit the vendor to provide its best possible response, which ultimately poorly serves both the issuing institution and the vendor. The timeframe conundrum can also be compounded by the fact that on occasion, there may be multiple **RFPs** being concurrently prepared by the vendor. Given the importance of this overall process to both institution and vendor, providing ample response time is crucial to all.

Many **RFPs** request that vendors provide an onsite presentation of their services. These presentations can occur either before the **RFP** is actually issued (generally to help determine which vendors *should* be sent an **RFP**) or after receipt of an **RFP** response to allow the vendor to not only present their services but also to engage in questions and answers pertaining to the **RFP**. In either case, the institution should allow the vendor sufficient time to provide a complete overview of its services while including time to demonstrate any databases germane

*continued on page 83*

