

# RFPs And RFQs

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In 1961, Astronaut Alan Shepard was the first American to go into space and orbit the earth for 15 minutes in a Redstone 3 rocket called Freedom 7.



Here are some tips on preparing Requests For Proposals.

After the flight, he said, “It’s a very sobering feeling to be up in space and realize that one’s safety factor was determined by the lowest bidder on a government contract.” Shepard’s statement is no surprise, as some people have preconceived notions that selecting the lowest bidder will not yield a favorable result.

However, the American space program was an overall success in spite of typically using the lowest bidder, which demonstrates that qualifications and an understanding of the client’s needs far outweigh cost.

In reality, the success of a project has less to do with using the lowest bidder and more to do with the company’s qualifications and, importantly, how it arrived at its fee.

To best determine who can provide the highest quality service at a fair price, one must take a close look at the selection process and the most effective way to write a Request for Proposal (RFP). Writing an RFP provides a comparable review of competing firms.

Design consultants have seen everything from well-written, concise RFPs that produce great results to those that lack the organization and detail necessary to gain comparable proposals from responding consultants.

The process of writing and issuing RFPs has changed significantly over the years, becoming much more complex.

Add the continued pressure to be transparent in the selection process, while being responsible with the buying power, and it's no wonder that writing, deciphering, and responding to RFPs has become an art in itself.

If you're new to the game, it can seem quite daunting at first.

Following are several key steps to writing an effective RFP and gaining the results you want:

**Step 1. Decide whether to issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) or a Request for Qualifications (RFQ).**

An RFP and an RFQ each has its own pros and cons, depending on whether they are issued to a pre-selected list of consultants, or are made available to all interested consultants.

The RFP typically asks the consultant to provide a scope of services and fees based on the content of the request. The RFP may yield a larger pool of consultants to select from but may not be the most efficient process in all cases.

The RFQ narrows the field to a short list of qualified consultants but typically does not request a design-fee estimate. Professional fees are negotiated after the selection has been made.

**Step 2. Be prepared to meet with consultants who are interested in submitting a proposal or a Statement of Qualifications (SOQ).**

An initial face-to-face meeting and an informative site walk are critical to a consultant's accurate preparation of a proposal or SOQ.



Properly preparing an RFP can make the interview process go much more smoothly.

While this requires additional time and effort, it can be very beneficial for both parties. The consultant gains a clearer picture of what you are looking for, and you are able to gain a perspective and develop a rapport with the potential consultant.

Successful projects are almost always based on good communication, and these initial meetings can help both you and the consultant have a better feel for each other's style, expertise, and personality.

### **Step 3. Write clear project descriptions.**

The importance of writing a clear, concise project description cannot be overstated.

Define the project scope upfront, including a logical project sequence and expectations, and identify specific deliverables. These are key steps in obtaining comparable proposals that have been prepared by consultants who have a similar understanding and close interpretation of the request for scope and fees.

An RFP that does not clearly articulate the project's scope and anticipated deliverables may trigger endless phone calls and requests for additional information, or it may simply prevent consultants from responding. An unclear scope may also result in change orders after the project has been awarded.

A pitfall to avoid is writing an RFP with unrealistic expectations, including services and deliverables that cannot be completed within a desired schedule and budget. This can be a red flag for consultants, and again, has the potential to produce proposals that cannot be fairly compared.

When preparing an RFP or RFQ, it may be beneficial to research similar projects and compare the scope of services with the design and construction costs. Look for similar projects that have been completed in other communities in the region, and contact colleagues who managed those projects. They may be able to offer some insight on the level of effort and the outcome.

**Step 4. Make sure you are not paying for more or less than what is needed for a successful outcome.**

In today's challenging economy, shrinking budgets and close financial scrutiny are expected.

However, a well-written, clearly defined RFP can ensure the project deliverable meets your specific needs and you are not paying for more or less than what is needed for a successful outcome. A well-thought-out RFP also avoids the possibility of additional time and expense for activities that should have been anticipated at the project's onset.

Selections are often made based on a price that is justified by perceived experience. Consultants know that many of the selections for a project are ultimately made by committees that we have never had the opportunity to meet, but that are obligated to spend money wisely and make the best choice.

They recognize the increasing emphasis placed on price, and therefore, focus their efforts on how to deliver the desired scope for a reasonable fee.

**Step 5. Prepare consultants for the interview process.**

Communicating specific expectations to consultants in advance of an interview ensures they will be well-prepared to answer your questions so you will be able to make a sound decision.

Providing consultants with a list of questions and the presentation format in advance of the interview can help facilitate the process.

The interview gives all participants the opportunity to clarify scope, define the roles of the team, establish communication protocols, and reiterate the approach so the project gets off on the right foot.

## **Step 6. Provide honest feedback to rejected consultants.**

A rejection provides an invaluable opportunity for the consultant to contact you and obtain honest feedback on how the selection was made and where the consultant's proposal fell short.

If you can make the time to offer honest, constructive feedback, it can be mutually beneficial as the consultant will be better prepared the next time you issue an RFP or RFQ.

While the steps outlined in this article may seem fairly obvious, and you may already have a solid, concise approach that has worked well in the past, this article may give you some ideas for improving your internal processes the next time you issue an RFP or an RFQ.

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