

Our firm doesn't seem to have much luck with RFPs. What do we have to do to win these beauty contests?



LINDA HAZELTON RESPONDS:

For starters—enter! If you aren't on the list of firms invited to participate, call and ask to submit a proposal. Better still, initiate the process yourself, before it becomes competitive. Research your target's industry and needs and then suggest a meeting with the client or prospect to design—together—a mutually beneficial partnering relationship.

When you do receive an RFP, consider avoiding competitions where you have reason to believe you are being used as a tool to get incumbent firms to lower their rates or deepen their discounts. Also, avoid being conflicted out of work for opposing parties or



competitors by receiving too much information during a supposed “beauty contest.” However, it is important to decide quickly whether you will participate; don't procrastinate.

Once you throw your hat in the ring, here are guidelines to follow.

- Devote adequate time to thorough preparation. Follow the rules and information flow requested in the RFP—assume that the prospective client knows what it wants.

- Do your homework. Use all available tools to gather the right information to inform your strategy. Don't limit yourself to online resources—use your networks, inside the firm, inside the prospect's organization, inside the industry. Talk to similar clients to get their perspectives. Find out who your competition is. It's fair to ask.

- Ask to meet with the prospect to fully understand its situation, its needs and its goals. In-person meetings are best, but if that's not practical, pick up the phone. Be ready with a list of topics and questions you'd like to cover, but don't make it a drill. Strive for a dialogue. Follow the 80/15/5 rule: Get them talking 80 percent of the time: ask questions or probe gently for further information 15 percent of the time: and spend the last 5 percent of the time responding to their inquiries or pursuing the lines of conversation they have opened. Remember to ask and listen, ask and care about the answer, ask and shut up! These same suggestions hold true for the oral portion of the beauty contest.

- Spend time making sure you understand the issues and the correct “problem definition” from the prospect's point of view. What's really at stake? How do they “feel” about it?

We are in a buyer's market economy—make the prospect's view your own.

- Once you've gathered as much information as you can, and have framed the issues, begin creating your strategic response. Work as a team when possible—assemble your team in one place (at least once) to discuss, brainstorm and strategize on your tactics. When building the case for your firm, be sure to consider your unique strengths. Remember that your strength may be in the composition of the team—match the prospect in terms of personal style, as well as considering whether a gender or diversity match makes sense. You must also consider the strengths of the competition. Ask yourself, “What is the weakness in that strength?” Don't tout features. Instead, demonstrate how you will be a more valuable solution.

- Enrich your written materials with visuals, especially graphs, charts and real-world, applicable photos or other illustrations. (Clipart is likely to clip your wings.)

- Remember that there are always a few questions in the buyer's mind: “So what?” “How can you prove that?” and “What's in it for me?” Anticipate and answer the questions in your narrative or in your oral remarks. Offer evidence, testimonials and proof. Have your clients call the prospect to speak on your behalf rather than simply providing the names of references.

Whether you win or lose, be sure to conduct debriefing sessions internally and with the prospect. What did your team do well? What would you do differently? What did other competitors do well or poorly? How can you learn from your experiences? Then apply your learnings next time. **LP**

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