

**VENDOR SELECTION USING THE RFP
PROCESS... IS IT FOR YOU? -- ONE LIBRARY'S
EXPERIENCE**

By Virginia A. Rumph



The following article is based on a presentation at the 1998 Indiana Library Federation Annual Conference given by Virginia A. Rumph (Serials Librarian, Butler University), Lindsay Gretz (Assistant Science Librarian, Butler University) and Eve Davis (Account Services Manager, EBSCO Information Services). The presentation and this article cover what an RFP is, the elements of an RFP, the evaluation process, advantages and disadvantages, a vendor's wish list, trends, and final thoughts.

DEFINITIONS

What is an RFP (Request for Proposal)? To paraphrase the ALA Glossary of Library Terms: an RFP is a document used to solicit proposals to provide a service or product. It can be formal or informal. A formal RFP is mandated by law or institutional regulations, and always involves a purchasing department or contracting office outside the library. An informal RFP is one that is not required by institutional or governmental regulations, and is administered totally within the library. Butler University employed an informal RFP in the serials vendor selection process.

In addition, a Periodical is defined as a publication intended to appear indefinitely and published more often than annually, and a Standing Order as all other open-ended publications including monographic series, annuals, and irregulars. Butler University Libraries subscribe to 1360 periodicals and 750 standing orders.

ELEMENTS OF THE RFP PROCESS

First, someone in authority, in our case the library dean, decides (often on advice) that the RFP should be done. Our dean designated the Serials Librarian (me) and the Assistant Science Librarian to be responsible for the RFP process.

Next, a timetable was created. For our serials RFP, we wanted to make sure the selected vendor(s) would be ready to handle our account by June 1, when our

fiscal year begins. It was also very important to avoid gaps in coverage if we switched vendors. Our time table included drafting the RFP document during January 1996, deciding which vendors to include, and mailing the document by January 31 to three periodical vendors and eight book vendors. We had to set a deadline for responses of March 15 (which gave the vendors six weeks) and schedule presentations by the three periodical vendors for March-early April. We called references, reached a final decision, and notified all the candidates of our decision by the end of April 1996. As this timetable unfolded, Lindsay and I had frequent consultations with our library dean.

Our RFP consisted of a cover letter informing the vendors of who we are, the date their reply was due, when the contract would commence, the period of the contract, instructions, and a summary of specifications in the RFP. These specifications were grouped by categories: background, reputation and financial stability of the agency, orders and cancellations, invoices and overall financial considerations, claims and title changes, customer based services, and computer based services.

Finally, as an appendix, a list of our paid serials (periodicals and standing orders) was sent to the periodical vendors, and a list of paid standing orders to the book vendors on a Mac formatted disk. Unfortunately, some of the vendors needed DOS, taking more time and effort. Also, when we decided to use a book vendor for the standing order titles, the periodical vendor we selected was unsure which titles should be deleted from the serials' list.

The evaluation process began with the arrival of waves of documentation from the vendors. In order to make any sense of all these responses, I decided to separate the periodical vendor responses from the book vendor responses, and create summaries of their answers to each question for easier comparison. This was especially useful for the book vendors since there were eight of them to scrutinize.

The evaluation continued with the three periodical vendor presentations which were open to all the staff (few were interested in attending). The presentations were very informative; each was unique. The staff saw each vendor's products and databases, and met the people who might be working with us.

Next, the dean called a meeting with the Associate Dean, Lindsay and myself to review information from the presentations and the summaries, as well as the original documents whenever a point needed clarification. At that meeting, we whittled down the number of book vendors from 8 to 2, and the periodical vendors from 3 to 2.

Follow-up questions to and from some of the finalists became necessary after this meeting. Lindsay proceeded to call each reference to schedule a convenient time for a formal phone interview. We devised questions for them that focused on those points that were most important to us. For the periodical vendor references these emphasized customer service responsiveness in such areas as new orders, claims, and title changes. For the book vendor references we were particularly interested in title status reports and other title inquiry services.

We learned it is important to talk to the right person in the chain of command—someone who deals with the vendor on a day-to-day basis, especially customer service personnel; someone in the trenches. Before our wrap-up meeting with the library dean, Lindsay and I pulled together all the pieces we had accumulated. We included answers from references, RFP response summaries, a book vendor testimonial from our Acquisitions Librarian, a list of pros and cons for each vendor using the key components of price, service, and electronic resources/database in a summary of our conclusions. We presented our findings to the library dean who agreed with our recommendations. As the last step in the process, he notified all the participating vendors of our decision.

REVIEW OF THE RFP

In reviewing the outcome of our RFP experience, what advantages and disadvantages did we discover? On the plus side, the RFP process gave us the opportunity to really scrutinize our serials' list. We were able to resolve problems and clear out dead wood before the process began. We had to articulate what we needed to look for from a vendor (e.g., reports, documentation, service, price). It gave us a method for comparing vendors using the same language and parameters. The process also provided a basis for future evaluation of vendors; are they doing what they said they would? The primary disadvantages were the amount of work required from both the library staff and the vendors; and, the amount of time consumed over the course of

months—creating the RFP document, waiting for responses, attending presentations, attending frequent meetings, and making decisions.

Eve Davis compiled a vendor's Wish List for the RFP process:

- Realistic expectations
- Allow 6-8 weeks for a response
- Allow for narrative responses—avoid yes/no check boxes
- Use the present vendor's invoice for title list pricing
- Proforma invoice required
- Mandatory presentations by vendors
- Required demonstrations of services
- Year 2000 compliance
- Request Dun & Bradstreet Report, not performance bonds
- Group questions in categories—avoid repetition
- Decision by library no longer than 6 weeks after vendor response deadline
- Submit RFP between Nov-May, but no later than July
- Request information only on expected services

She also talked about Trends in the RFP process:

- Either Long and detailed or Short and to the point
- Increased role of purchasing agents
- Hidden agenda to favor or disqualify a particular vendor
- Price as sole consideration
- Shorter time frame to respond
- Bundled services
- Stress on financial health
- Unrealistic expectations
- Increased level of involvement of new vendor in the transition period
- Automation as an important consideration
- Electronic capabilities increasingly important
- Repetitious questions
- RFP only—no presentation

OUR CONCLUSION

Could we have come to the same conclusion via an easier route—No! The combination of periodical

vendor presentations, answers to a thorough battery of questions, references' responses, and the mental exercise of articulating our needs were all crucial in reaching a decision we could justify to others and ourselves. Was the result worth all the effort—Definitely. The working relationships we have established with both the periodical vendor and the book vendor we selected are light years ahead of our previous experiences with serial vendors. We have a pruned serials list, and a logical division between the titles our periodical vendor handles and those that our book vendor handles.

As a concluding comment (remembering the ALA definition of an RFP), the usefulness of the Request for Proposal is not limited to serials. Any situation in which a vendor may be employed is fair game for the RFP process.

If you would like a copy of our RFP documents, please phone or email me at (317) 940-6491, vrumph@butler.edu.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia A. Rumph is the Serials Librarian at Butler University. She has held the position since Sept. 1992. Her duties include supervising the acquisition, claiming, binding, and cataloging of all the library's serials. Prior to becoming Serials Librarian, Rumph was the Assistant Catalog Librarian, and the Periodicals Librarian at Butler.