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How To Use An RFP To Find An Advertising Agency

Few people can honestly say they like RFPs.

They aren't easy to write, can be a pain to administer and the results are often difficult to evaluate. And, in the case of using an RFP to find an advertising agency, I'd say their effectiveness is questionable.

And, although there are probably some agency executives who like RFPs, I've never met any. Then again, I've never met any Hungarians either, but we all know they exist. So I'm willing to accept the fact that some agency people like the RFP process. I just can't imagine why.

Don't misunderstand, an RFP is fine for some purchases. Plumbing fixtures come to mind. Anything where price is the biggest issue. Just not advertising. Would you use an RFP to find a law firm or a doctor or even a new CPA? Probably not. (Likely, it has something to do with the perception of advertising in the eyes of the buyers. But that's a discussion for another day.)

“If cost is the only thing that matters, it's far cheaper to do it yourself.”

Sure a typical RFP has all the staffing and experience questions, but “what will it cost to do thus-and-so” is the big one. It's usually the one that does or doesn't get you to the next round. And most of the agency

people I know don't sell on price. Most of us are selling some combination of relationship, creativity, category experience, enthusiasm and a track record.

Of course, that doesn't mean the price tag for that sort of thing isn't an issue. It is. Just not the only issue. Or the main issue. Not if you want to wind up with the best creative agency for your account, that is. Basing an agency decision on price doesn't mean you'll get the best agency. It means you'll get the cheapest. And if cost is the only thing that matters, it's far cheaper to do it yourself. It also assumes that agencies are commodities. Like sow bellies. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

At the same time, having been on the client side of an agency search, I can certainly understand the facility of an RFP. If only to avoid presentations from agencies who, for one reason or another, have no business pitching the business. Too big, too small, too far away, not enough experience – whatever. It's also a good way to – with any luck – compare dissimilar organizations on similar terms.

But if for some reason you're required, bound and determined or just inclined to use an RFP to find a creative firm, there are certainly better ways to do it. There is a good way to use an RFP in an agency search.

Don't leave price out

Creating a good creative RFP doesn't mean leaving price out of the equation, but let's start



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with that anyway. Instead of asking what an agency will charge to do activities you've laid out, why not lay out your marketing problem and a budget figure instead – even a hypothetical one? Let the agencies tell you what they can do for your budget. Let them flex their minds a bit and show you what good stewards of your finances they can be.

I'm not talking about (gasp) spec creative. I'm talking about broad strokes of creative or media strategy. Budget allocation. You're bound to have a budget figure in mind. If not, better do that before you even think about looking for an agency.

Of course if you give an agency a budget figure, they're going to spend it, and if you don't give them a figure they just might come in way below your actual budget. Which makes you a hero. That's true. But they also might come in way over what you can reasonably spend and even way over what they'd be willing to take to handle your account. So nobody wins. The point is, nobody can really give you a good picture of what they can do for you if they are flying blind – that is, they don't know what you are willing to spend to do it.

Give us a dollar figure – if only a range – and see which one of us makes the best use of it. Even if it's a made-up dollar figure. Just don't make us guess at it. You have a figure in mind; you know you do. What you want to know is which agency can give you the most for it.

Get some existing samples

Here's another thing. Ask for some creative samples and don't worry about it if the samples they give you aren't exactly in your category. (After all, isn't there

some currency in a fresh approach?) Ask them to show you the work they are proudest of, regardless of category. That will give you some real insight into their creative inclinations and help you judge whether you're on the same creative page. And that's a real important thing to know up front. For both parties. If you're interested in a long-term relationship without all the fighting and frustration that is. Fact of the matter is if you're buying what they're selling you're going to get along. Anything else, and sooner or later it becomes a chore for everybody.

“Nobody can give you a good picture of what they can do for you if they are flying blind”

Also, get examples that show you how they work beyond the creative – timelines, strategies for other clients, success stories. What do their invoices look like? Their proposals? Find out about all the elements of the relationship, because they all matter.

This one probably should have been first. Who's writing your RFP? Is it based on a historical style? The same one you used for, oh let's just say, plumbing fixtures? Is it the same format that's been used for years and years? Maybe it was written by a committee. The best way to get the proper answers is to ask the proper questions. And someone with advertising experience is going to know how to ask the proper questions. If you don't have anybody with advertising experience on hand, hire someone on a project basis to help you. It's not hard to find someone. Honest. Check with the American



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Advertising Federation or the American Association of Advertising Agencies or the Second Wind Network.

Here's one last thing. Be fair. I've heard many people say that RFP really ought to be spelled CYA. Or that it's wired, going through the legal motions with a designated winner already in hand. If you're not looking, if you're just trying to light a fire under your current agency, don't waste anybody's time. Please. Not even yours. If you're not legally bound to issue an RFP, and you've got an agency that tops your list, talk to them first. Find out all those things I listed earlier. See if you can make a decision without being disingenuous with everybody else.

But in any case, be as honest with everybody as you can.

My partner and I once went to a bid conference for a local government economic development account. The gentleman running the show did everything in his power to be fair. "This is a representative from our current agency," he said, pointing to the man next to him. "We are very happy with them and the work they do. I repeat. We are very happy with their work. But we are legally bound to issue an RFP and conduct a review every three years. Our current agency – and we are very, very happy with them – will be participating in the competition. Any questions?"

Somebody actually asked one.

- Karen Nasuti

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