

Issuing RFPs: A Checklist for Organizations

1) Before Issuing an RFP	
	Explore alternative ways to find partners (e.g., existing vendor lists, network outreach)
	Clearly define the purpose of the RFP (why it's needed)
	Establish the project scope
	Confirm the available budget
	Identify preferred approaches or methodologies
	Define vendor assessment criteria and assign weights
	Set a realistic assessment and decision timeline
2) Writing the RFP: What It Should Include	
Introduction	Brief description of your organization
	Overview of the program or initiative and links to learn more
	Clear statement of the RFP purpose
Project Parameters	Description of expected deliverables
	Outline of preferred approaches or methodologies
	Statement on whether alternative approaches are welcome
	Expectations for consultant engagement with the internal team
	Role of the organization's point of contact during the project
	Relevant internal policies, standards, or frameworks that apply
	Project timeline, including key milestones
	Location of work and any travel expectations
Assessment Criteria and Submission Requirements	Project budget including tax
	Required vendor qualifications and relevant experience
	Assessment criteria and relative weighting
	Proposal submission requirements (format, length, sections, deadlines, required examples, references)
	Named contact person for RFP questions and clarification
3) After Issuing the RFP	
	Maintain clear timelines and adhere to them
	Promote the RFP through networks and consultant rosters
	Manage and respond to bidder questions
	Review and assess submitted proposals
	Identify top candidates for interviews
	Conduct second-round interviews if required (e.g., with Board members)
	Negotiate and finalize contracts
	Notify all bidders of the outcome
	Treat the process as part of long-term relationship building
	Reflect on the process and identify improvements for future RFPs

5 signs an RFP is intended for a specific vendor

Sometimes organizations issue an RFP with a preferred vendor in mind, often because of internal procurement requirements. Experienced consultants are generally aware of this context and will factor it into their decision about whether to put forward a proposal. Here are some specific signals experienced consultants watch closely for.

1. Short submission timelines

- Brief turnaround periods tend to advantage vendors who already understand the organization, context, or scope of work. When potential vendors see this, they may assume a preferred bidder already has a head start.

2. Limited opportunity to ask questions

- RFPs with no clear Q&A process and no contact person reduce opportunities for vendors to test assumptions or refine their approach. When potential vendors see this, they may assume the client organization is uninterested in taking the time to hear from other vendors.

3. Recent or ongoing work with a similar vendor

- Potential vendors look to see who else an organization has recently worked with, knowing that this history often shapes the current request. When potential vendors see a recent record of similar work done by other vendors, they may assume that continuity or extension of existing work will be an important deciding factor.

4. Little transparency about how proposals will be assessed

- If the project budget and proposal scoring approach are not shared, vendors have less insight into what matters and how decisions will be made. When potential vendors see this, they may assume the selection logic is intentionally vague to advantage a preferred bidder.

5. Highly specific or narrow requirements

- Very precise criteria (niche expertise, methods, tools, etc.) limit the pool of potential responders. When potential vendors see this, they may assume the criteria are designed to advantage a preferred bidder.

Will our RFP attract who we want it to?

A final checklist before issuing your RFP

Before you circulate your RFP, use this to pressure-test whether your RFP genuinely invites good quality proposals. **Lots of checks** will lead to high quality prospective vendors who are more likely to take your RFP seriously.

Initial Check

- Have we determined that an RFP is the best method to get what we need? (Have we considered other options, such as direct inquiries to specific vendors that interest us?)

Timeline

- Is the submission window long enough for *new* vendors to respond well?

Questions and Clarification

- Have we provided a reasonable timeframe to receive questions and provide answers?
- Have we specified who to contact, and how, with questions?
- Do we have the right people available to answer questions during the specified timeframe?

Vendor History

- Have we acknowledged any recent or ongoing work with similar vendors?

Proposal Assessment Transparency

- Are the criteria, scoring, and weighting for proposals clearly described?
- Have we provided a clear budget or range, and specified what included/excluded in this? (e.g., taxes, travel)
- Does the scoring approach reflect what matters most to us?

Scope and Criteria

- Have we avoided overly narrow or niche criteria unless these are truly essential?

Final check

- If we are issuing this RFP solely to meet a procurement policy or requirement of a funder, have we transparent with bidders about this context and reflected on the effort we're asking of bidders?

The bottom line:

Ask yourself: “*Would a strong, capable vendor with no prior relationship feel this RFP is worth their time?*”

If the answer is “nope!” or “maybe no”, expect fewer (and weaker) bids.