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Making the Decision to Respond to an RFP

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

Winning a great project begins with writing an amazing proposal. In this issue, and continuing in the July/August issue, I will address the steps in the proposal process and how you can win more than your fair share of projects.

Gaining a new project most often begins with the completion of a proposal in response to a Request for Proposals (RFP) and appointing a manager or principal—a designated proposal principal—to oversee it. By designating a proposal principal, it will be clear to the other staff that proposal efforts are extremely important, and also helps to build a business development mind-set in the firm. The proposal principal is one of the first people responsible for reviewing the RFP, and he or she helps with the decision of whether the project is in sync with business strategy—the go-or-no-go assessment. Too many designers make an automatic decision to go after any project. However, that is the wrong approach for the lasting success of your business. Considerations for the go-or-no-go assessment include:

- If the project fits one of your “sweet spots” of expertise or knowledge.
- Whether clients and other participants are good people to work with.
- Realistic project parameters, such as budget and schedule.
- Appropriateness of proposal costs in time, energy, and marketing support; a high potential for a positive return on investment.

In all honesty, I fell into the “let’s just go for it” model for years, but then I smartened up and recognized that short-term gains can sabotage long-term success. Winning a project that is not the right fit, or working with unappreciative clients, will sap your time and energy from working with great clients and designing top projects. You must research both the company and its leaders online and through speaking with colleagues, contractors, and furniture suppliers.

Once you’ve determined that the go-or-no-go decision is a definite go to submit, then the next step is to reread the RFP and begin to analyze the client’s hot buttons. Client and project research is critical because there may be items that are either omitted or poorly stated in the RFP, or things written between the lines. Speak with professional peers for more information, but recognize that they are interpreting the project scope from their own perspective. So don’t take their thoughts as gospel.

During the proposal process, I would often invite potential clients to connect through LinkedIn. A proposal process is a sales effort, and the client expects that architects and designers will be working all

options to connect and win the project. After all, the real estate brokers did just that to get hired.

Because an RFP often does not include all the information needed for a designer to write a tight scope of services, you will need to ask questions to fully understand the client’s needs. After detailed analysis of the RFP, the proposal principal should immediately email the prospective client for clarifications. This initiative will convey to the client that you are aware and already focused on their project. The email might include these questions:

- What is the anticipated construction cost?
- Will the general contractor be brought on board via a fee and general conditions bid early in the process, or will the project be hard bid after we complete construction documents?
- Do you want us to design the project to a level of LEED certification for sustainability? Why or why not?

From my experience, here is something else to consider: Proactively write your own generic RFP draft including all required details. Then send it to prospective brokers, owner’s reps, and clients that you know. They will save your draft RFP on file, and then likely make use of it when they are ready to issue an RFP. This way, you are at a great advantage because you had written the RFP draft, know the requirements, and can quickly and confidently respond. And here’s one more tip: If the RFP lists dates for interviews, immediately call and ask to be scheduled for the last slot, beating your competitors to the best position.

I hope that this will help your firm win more projects! In my July/August column, I will focus on proposal development, including the establishment of the project plan, the sequence of content, and laying the groundwork for the presentation interview. Good hunting!

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