

# Ten Tips to Respond to Respond to RFPs and Still Keep Your Sanity

So it looks like this bid could be a “Go”. Seasoned RFPers – you know who you are, with spare ink cartridges and snacks in your desk drawer – skip down to Sanity Saver #3. Novices: you’ve just received your first sanity saving tip: you can work and plan as hard as humanly possible and still some RFPs *will* have you at your desk at midnight. Some last minute pricing revisions *will* get handwritten, then inserted on the mad-dash drive to deliver on time. So...**Sanity Saver #1:** keep stashes of food on-hand. You’ll need it.

Novices, the first step is to look **hard** at the Evaluation Criteria, Scope of Work and Minimum or Technical Requirements. Have you determined **realistically** that your firm does possess all of the required experience or qualifications – without any major “stretching”? Are you clear that your firm’s technical abilities can meet or exceed the Incumbent Contractor’s? If you’re not **absolutely** certain, go find online one of the many excellent, simple Bid/No Bid Decision Making charts.

**Sanity Saver #2:** “Should We Go For It?” is different than “Can We Go For It?”. Does internal staff have available time to prepare **good** Proposals, both Technical and Cost? Industry-acknowledged average writing time for new proposal narrative is four pages per day; does your firm’s personnel have the writing ability and available man-hours? Can your firm afford the time and potential revenue lost when proposal preparation takes those folks away from other revenue-producing tasks?

Open a calendar and start with the end goal date, no less than three days before actual Due Date. Add half a day if you have multiple authors, and/or if page numbering is required. Will any personnel key to the writing or pricing be on vacation? Did you account for holidays, company-wide Sales/other major meetings? Now “reverse engineer” back to today’s date...**then** answer “Can We Go For It?” Novices, RFPs come in “bubbles” around fiscal year ends and contract start dates. To prevent your firm from missing the revenue-producing possibilities of these bubbles, develop a stable of 1-2 Independent Contractors for “surge support”. It’s just smart business to assure that We Should will always be We Can.

**Sanity Saver #3:** Calendar management. And I’m talking addicted-to-it, checking-it-six-times-a-day, automated-reminders-sent-to-your-every-device calendar management.

- Last Date for Questions: calendar an automated reminder –a full 24 hours *before*;
- Key Writing/Pricing Personnel: calendar their days absent/on vacation/at or prepping for major meetings;
- Date to Request/obtain Evaluation Matrix -- calendar an automated reminder. If you don’t win this one, find out why not -- then revise any weaknesses in your proposal so you win the next one.

Now start with the end goal date, build in your mini/project deadlines and *then* look at possible Team meeting dates. Many Proposal teams standardize them at the same date/time each week. Since we all want as few meetings as possible, I find placing them strategically around mini/project deadlines really helps my team members to produce their best work, and consistently brings out a better Final. For example, if all final drafts are due in hand from Subject Matter Experts on a Friday, schedule a meeting on the Wednesday before. Why? Move on to Sanity Saver #4...

**Sanity Saver #4:** yes, this RFP may very possibly employ a large number of folks in your firm tomorrow -- but most of your Team have *today’s* work on their plates. Plus, most folks just plain don’t like to write! So face it right now – the High Priority items on their To Do List might not include this proposal...so remind, remind, remind.

- Before sending any meeting invitations, check Team members’ schedules *then* calendar team meetings; get acknowledgment of dates/times.
- Calendar *and send* reminder emails the day before project deadlines;

- Calendar *and send* reminder emails the day before and the half-hour before scheduled meeting times/dates. (Novices, if one mission-critical team member misses one meeting the result might easily be you at your desk at midnight pulling those snacks from your desk drawer!)

**Sanity Saver #5:** some housekeeping basics to cover in Team Meeting #1:

- Collect & share *full* contact info among the entire team: cell numbers, and cell numbers of assistants, alternate email options, even fax numbers -- and preferred method(s) of communicating.
- Confirm there aren't any communications challenges such as software versions, file size limits in emails, doesn't-check-that-box-often, etc.

**Sanity Saver #6: When you do email, use only very specific email subject lines which define clearly the action required and denote the level of urgency; ex. ABC RFP: need input by COB Friday 10/1.** In 10 additional seconds now, you get much more effective results -- and more readily searchable emails.

**Sanity Saver #7:** The very best tip to manage your proposal window is efficient and effective communication. So your disbelief is understandable when, in this Information Technology age, I *strongly* recommend picking up the phone for old-fashioned verbal *conversations*. Yes, *Sanity Saver #7* is: don't rely solely on email or text messages; **TALK** to team members. Why? Because the core of contract-winning proposal writing is Win Theme(s). The unique strengths, abilities, experience, major accomplishments and qualifications of your organization and its personnel – known as Key Differentiators – are what proposal writers leverage into Win Themes. Win Themes consistently reasserted in narrative and infographics throughout each section of the proposal substantially increases your chances. Solid details and experiential anecdotes prove your Win Theme statements i.e. prove the benefits only your firm can offer to the Evaluation Committee. And most of those winning, solid details will come from your Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)...in conversation, rarely via email.

**Sanity Saver #8:** Once you create your Table of Contents, print one copy of it double-spaced. Then keep it as your “bible” – pencil in notes of possible supporting documents to include, which section to include them, and other noteworthy details as they come to mind – such as during *conversations* with SMEs.

**Sanity Saver #9:** Solid steps right at the beginning will save your \_\_\_ at the end.

- First, check/order supplies (yes Novices, do this every RFP/every week). Make your proposal “pop” with Bright White 24 lb. paper, at a cost of little more than plain copy paper. If binders are required, order the paper already 3-hole punched. Save the box the binders are delivered in: a perfect fit for shipping out the Finals.
- Create the full, final accurate label as instructed for the outside of the box. Then fully, carefully double-check it.
- Are you doing production? *When* your brain (notice I don't say “If”) can't possibly handle another second of this or any other RFP, do production prep: open the binders up fully, slide in your covers, then stack 'em up, open up tab packages, etc. Now is the time to discover you received A-Z tabs when you need 1-23. Plus that thirty minutes now could save you from begging the receptionist to flirt with the FedEx guy at pickup time.

**And Tip #10:** Win. To do so, re-read all of the above. Then read again -- and internalize -- #6, #7 & #8. Then: Answer the RFP's Questions. I repeat: answer the questions. All of the questions. In the order required. Directly, with facts, not fluff, and include verifiable stats and solid proof of *any* statement. Want to win more \$\$ for your firm's coffers through government bids? Don't claim to be the best -- prove it.

*business opportunities that match her client organizations' core capabilities and improve their position on future competitive procurements.*

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