



A growing and engaged contributor base is the lifeblood of many nonprofits, enabling them to carry out and expand their missions. Therefore, it is no surprise that the search and selection process for marketing partners – agencies and consultants who specialize in direct fundraising – is of great importance.

Deciding **WHO** should be considered for this critical partnership is an obvious priority. Often overlooked, however, is **HOW** to invite them into the competition for your work. The Request for Proposal (RFP) process can be a valuable tool for nonprofits to compare, vet and choose fundraising partners. It is surprising, therefore, that so often organizations miss

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the opportunity to control the selection process and reap the greatest amount of useful information required in order to make an informed decision.

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Here are some tips we have compiled from our collective experience as both RFP creators and responders that we think will help you get the most out of the RFP experience.



1. Share information. An RFP isn't just about asking for information; in order to get high-quality, relevant responses, you need to be willing to share information that will help inform their response. So provide plenty of information: share creative controls; share data; and share issues, pain points and recent successes. Have the agencies sign a non-disclosure agreement.

If you are asking for meaningful financial projections from your candidates, you must provide data to them, otherwise it will simply be an exercise based on general assumptions.

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2. Answer questions from all candidates. The RFP process should be fair and professional, with all candidates having equal access to all relevant information. Indicate that you will compile questions from all candidates and provide answers to them. It's also good form to identify all firms that have received your RFP. You may receive a more competitive or more creative response by doing so.

3. Be fair with the deadlines. Allow enough time for candidates to formulate a meaningful response, but not so much as to discourage their momentum. Four weeks is usually sufficient for creative and strategy development.



4. Narrow the field. There are two schools of thought on this – invite everyone to compete for your business or invite just a few. Issuing an RFP to too many potential candidates often becomes an unwieldy venture and can drain your internal resources. However, preselecting candidates based on reputation or competitor usage may leave the perfect partner out of consideration. The fact is that the RFP process itself is a learning experience for you and a great way to help you rethink your program as you prepare a series of good questions and answers.

One solution: Distribute an RFI (Request for Information) to a large group to winnow the list down prior to releasing the RFP. Ideally, the RFI should include some scenario or problem solving questions that will result in answers that can assist you in developing a “short” list of suppliers to whom a more detailed RFP may be sent.

5. Set a page limit to avoid getting a stack of mind-numbing 200+ page proposals. Not only will your task be more manageable, but it is one of the quickest and easiest things you can do to set the RFP experience tone. We suggest 20–40 pages. Hold “table stakes” questions (quality assurance, statement of commitment, etc.) for the later stages of the review process.

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6. Avoid being prescriptive about the response format.

Specify what candidates should cover, but let them decide how to achieve that. Their approach will tell you a lot about their personality and how they think – which is important. You are looking for partners who can generate unique ideas.

7. Provide three problems and ask for

best thinking. Make sure your candidates understand that you expect strategic and tactical recommendations. Define the problems concisely. For example: What timing and touch points should we use to convert donors to sustainers? How should we capture email addresses? How should we convert non-donors to donors? How should we identify planned giving prospects? How should we improve retention for \$100+ donors?

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8. Ask for creative. Focus creative solutions on the problem(s) you need to solve (e.g., lagging acquisition performance). Define a limit for the creative, ideally two to three campaigns. You are looking for quality not quantity.

9. Be particular about pricing. Agencies price differently.

Some are retainer-based, some charge production fees or markups, some use a little of both. Define the pricing model you wish to see in the RFP process. To be able to compare apples to apples for production, provide 5 to 10 control samples and quantities and ask for pricing with print, lettershop, merge purge, list and postage broken out.



10. References. Being a strong presenter is not necessarily an indication that a candidate agency is a strong performer. References can provide a real picture of an agency's ability to deliver day-to-day. Ask for three current client references and one from a former client. Call at least one other that does not appear on the provided list.

11. Follow up with all candidates, win or lose. Informing candidates that they did not win the work is part of the job. Take the time to talk with someone from each firm that submitted a proposal, and provide a candid critique.

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12. Staffing: the biggest issue?

Staffing ends up being an issue for both sides. If you are a large account, then existing staff will likely be redeployed from another part of the agency, or hired new from the outside. Smaller accounts may be serviced with staff who are shared across multiple client teams. In any case, not many agencies willingly maintains an experienced team with excess capacity, simply waiting for new business.

Every client in the RFP process worries about the fit of the eventual day-to-day team, once the contract has been awarded and the senior pitch team has been replaced. It is perfectly reasonable to ask for video and/or bios introducing the people who could work on your business. It is also perfectly reasonable to expect that some, if not most, of these professionals will end up on the day-to-day team. But it is important to understand that there will likely be some substitution by the time the contract comes to life. What is



most important to determine is an agency baseline for staff expertise and a feel for agency culture.

The structure of the agency is also an important thing to understand. What positions will manage the work on your account? Where else might they be assigned? Are they experienced professionals or new to the industry? Are they new to your nonprofit sector? Can the agency at least guarantee the assignment of the team leadership?

Additional suggestions to strengthen the process:

- The in-person presentation length is another “Goldilocks” scenario: If it is too short, it’s rushed; if it’s too long, it’s overwhelming. We suggest 2 ½ hours.
- Make sure you have a good cross section of internal stakeholders represented on the review panel, including someone from your finance department. Making them a part of the decision-making process will encourage buy-in to your decisions later on.
- Provide clear evaluation criteria to the internal team (for both the written and in-person presentations). Develop a scoring system based on expertise, creativity, references, analytical skill, budget management, likeability, ability to meet schedule, and overall price. Award points for clarity, and deduct them for marketing rhetoric and acronyms.
- Be sure to talk about transition planning and process with finalists. This is a key issue that can be overlooked in the rush of the RFP.

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Some useful RFP requests and questions

- What can you tell us about the American donor today?
- Please include samples of successful renewal and acquisition pieces and explain why they were successful.
- Describe some creative segmentation strategies.
- How have you used external data such as modeling scores, donor “intelligence” from surveys, etc.?
- What types of communication strategies have you developed/used to address various segments of a donor base?
- What are the best strategies for us to accomplish cultivation?
- How do your clients recognize loyalty among current donors?
- Do you have any unique acquisition list strategies?
- How can you make our renewal program stand out from the rest?
- What are you doing that is new and cutting edge?
- How have you handled Boomer donors in acquisition and donor renewal?
- Provide an example of a fully integrated campaign.
- Define new income strategies for growth beyond the “standard” direct mail and email programs.

*What are you doing that is new
and cutting edge?*

For assistance with your next RFP, contact **Alexis Sabloff** at CDR Fundraising Group, asabloff@cdrfg.com or 301-858-1500.

