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How to write an RFP for website design

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A big part of the success off any project happens before the project begins, and even before contracts are signed. When creating a successful website, pre-planning and vendor selection are just as important as design and development.

For a lot of organizations, the solution is to draft a request for proposal document, or RFP, and send that to a number of potential vendors. We get a lot of RFPs at Gravitate, in fact, we're kind of RFP connoisseurs, and we can tell you that not all of them are created equal. Some of them are so bad it's common for us to opt out of the process altogether.

We're not the only company that does this either. Here is a quote from Happy Cog's contact form regarding RFPs:

Happy Cog considers thoughtfully constructed requests for proposals that don't require speculative work. Overly restrictive RFPs that discourage direct communication will likely not be considered.

This is before they've even seen your RFP! What gives RFPs such a bad rap?

They often aren't focused on finding the right partner, or on creating a great finished product!

With all of this in mind, we wanted to provide some tips to help your organization create an RFP that would lead to an effective engagement with your selected vendor and a compelling project.

Here are 10 things to consider when writing your RFP:

Define your goals, not your solutions

- A list of goals allows vendors to demonstrate their competence and decision-making process, both of which should be big factors in your choice of firm. You're contacting companies to utilize *their* expertise in web design and digital marketing—so why are you telling them exactly how everything looks and functions.

The process of selecting a vendor should not be that different from working with them

- It's pretty simple, if you write an open, creative RFP, you're more likely to find an open, creative partner for your project. If you write a very bureaucratic, restrictive document you will receive more responses from inflexible companies.

- A lot of companies want to email a document to 12 companies and then wait for a response. If your intention is to work closely with your chosen firm to build a fantastic site, then you should devote the necessary time to collaborate with them at this stage in the process as well.

Don't try to make everything an apples-to-apples comparison

- Many RFPs force respondents to fit everything into a tightly controlled format of deliverables, timeline, and pricing in order to make direct comparisons. The problem is that this also tends to obscure the true strengths and weaknesses of the companies you're talking to.

Give as much context as you can

- *Why* you want to do something is just as important as *what* you want to do.

Seriously, give as much context as you can

- You've proposed a 2-month launch window—why? Is this because of a big event you're planning, or is this an arbitrary internal deadline?

- You have requested that you stay with a Drupal CRM—is this because that's the only format you've used, because you have a Drupal developer on staff, or because your IT director thinks it would be a good fit?

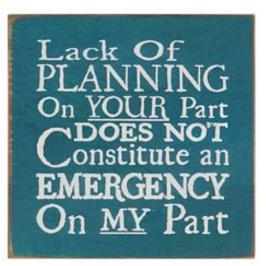- You want to improve your search ranking? How do you rank now and who are your primary competitors?

Get technical when you need to

- What systems are you currently using, such as Salesforce or Paypal? How are you using them and how do they need to integrate with your site?

Be respectful

- This is your only RFP, however the companies you're contacting may get 10-20 of them per month. They want to respond in a thorough and thoughtful way, but if you put too many restrictions or require too much time from these companies, you aren't valuing their time, and you may not get a great response (or any response).

Be realistic

Lack Of PLANNING On YOUR Part DOES NOT Constitute an EMERGENCY On MY Part

The actual quote…

- A lot of RFPs contain quick turn-around times for a proposal response, or for the final project. There's that old saying, "Your lack of planning is not our problem." By rushing through this process, you're limiting the amount of time and attention these firms can pay to you, and ultimately hurting yourself.

- Please list a budget and do some research on realistic budgets before you set a firm limit (this also could fall under be respectful). This is a good way to let companies figure out if they are a good fit for your project, and vice-versa, before going through the full scoping process.

Be Open

- If you require everyone to conform to your proposal format and list of solutions, you may be missing out on better solutions. Often, the best companies (ahem, Gravitate) have to choose between giving you the answers you want to hear (which is the best way to close business) and providing the best solutions for your company and audiences.

- You're contacting an outside company because your team members aren't experts in web design, so you should be happy when they challenge your assumptions or ask difficult questions. The good companies are keeping up with modern trends, and the great ones are leading the way.

Beware the template

- The process of writing an RFP should be a deep dive into your company's messaging and goals. If you approach the process this way, the exercise is just as important as the final RFP. If you start with a poorly written template that you downloaded online, you may get lost in answering questions that don't matter to you, your vendor, or your audience.

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