

crafting a smart RFP

Getting what you really need from the Request for Proposal process

Includes

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Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are facing challenges, changes and uncertainties as never before. Seismic shifts in the media landscape, advertising and the rapid rise of social media and mobile are all changing the role and relevance of DMOs. Successful DMOs need future-focused marketing programs.

Request for Proposals (RFP) is a process that is often mired in legality, formality and rigid guidelines—the result often being narrow, short-term requirements and less freedom to evaluate new approaches, innovative solutions and creative ideas. This document provides a set of resources, best practice suggestions and thought starters for creating a marketing RFP that will meet your DMO's future needs.

A well-written, idea-seeking RFP will result in better responses from bidders—responses with more creativity that are better suited to solving your DMO's future challenges and meeting the needs of your target audiences. The right RFP can lead to solutions that help your organization—and your destination—thrive.

Top 10 Tips

for a Crafting a Smart RFP

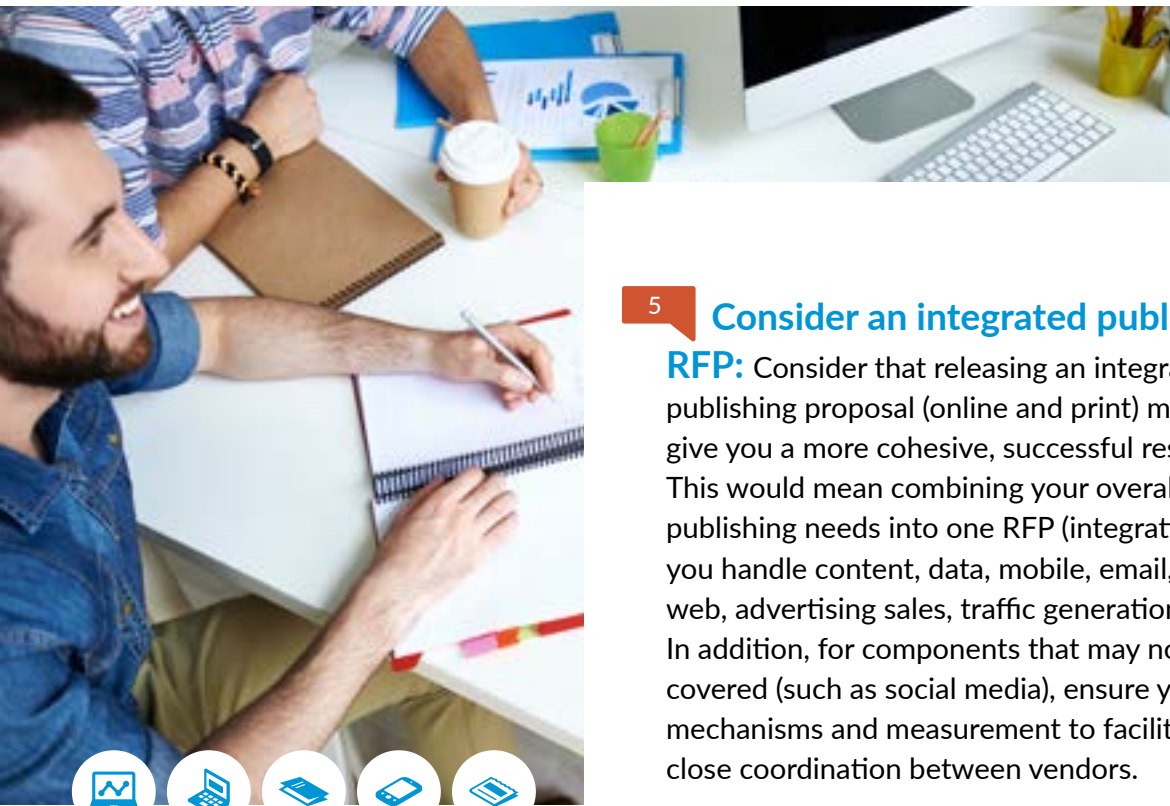
1 Allow freedom of response: An RFP should encourage creativity and innovation. Since you're not purchasing a commodity such as asphalt or a new phone system, try to steer clear of product specifics where possible to keep the door open to new ideas and new approaches to communicating with your audiences.

2 Provide specifics where they're needed: Freedom doesn't mean you should be vague. Bidders need to know what you want. Define your challenges, needs and objectives without giving bidders specific product definition, if possible. For example, if one of your objectives is to engage the domestic Hispanic audience, then state that, but avoid pre-set solutions for how to engage that audience, such as a translated print guide.



3 Consider how the world has changed: Consumers don't think in silos, and neither should you. Consumers are moving seamlessly between print, web, email and social media—and the more you consider how the individual pieces of your marketing efforts can and should integrate to support each other, the more creative and innovative bidders' solutions will be, and the more effective your marketing program.

4 Focus on mobile: One critical change to consider is the rise of mobile. The proliferation of high-speed mobile networks, smartphones and tablets of all shapes and sizes and, most recently, wearables and Internet-connected cars and appliances, has made connectivity to rich travel information ubiquitous and pervasive. Make sure you ask bidders to respond to the opportunities and challenges of this mobile world where your website must be viewable across a bewildering range of devices and situations.



5 Consider an integrated publishing

RFP: Consider that releasing an integrated publishing proposal (online and print) might give you a more cohesive, successful result. This would mean combining your overall publishing needs into one RFP (integrating how you handle content, data, mobile, email, print, web, advertising sales, traffic generation, etc). In addition, for components that may not be covered (such as social media), ensure you have mechanisms and measurement to facilitate close coordination between vendors.

6 Give yourself the flexibility to make the best choices:

It would be ideal to find exactly what you want and need from one bidder but, being realistic, all companies have strengths and weaknesses. Requiring bidders to respond in an “all or nothing” manner might limit the responses you get, and the great ideas that result. Provide enough flexibility so that vendors can bid on some or all products and services.

7 Decide how you will handle the

800-pound gorilla: Of course price matters. But make a conscious effort not to design your RFP so that it weights cost too heavily, or judges by price alone. If you do, you’ll move some of your most important marketing efforts to commodity status rather than moving your organization toward real choices. If you like the ideas you see in a proposal, but don’t have the budget for all of them, there is always a negotiation process available with the bidder in which you can scale things back, or create a stepped approach to get everything you want over time.

8 Focus on your audiences:

Make sure to frame your RFP (and ask your bidders) to be audience-focused. Define your needs as clearly as you can in relation to your audience—the domestic leisure audience, international visitors, meeting planners, tour operators, etc. Doing so encourages bidders to think about how to meet your needs by meeting your audience’s needs, rather than how to build a better mousetrap.



9

Web development RFPs should be led by marketing, not technology:

A new website or other online marketing program must first meet your audience's needs and the marketing objectives of your DMO and industry. The technology to achieve this should enable and empower this outcome—not dominate the process. Try to avoid limiting creativity in proposals by having prescriptive technology requirements. Make sure your senior managers (especially those responsible for marketing) are the primary decision makers—and the process is not overly controlled or dominated by your IT staff or advisors.

10

Emphasize data-driven evolution:

In the media landscape of the future, a website or even print publication is an ongoing process of improvement and refinement—driven by data, analytics, research and social media feedback. A destination website is an ongoing process, not a one-off project. Be certain your RFP emphasizes the importance of continual, iterative evolution, and ensure vendors (and your team) are equipped with the right analytics, research tools and project management skills to be efficient and flexible in managing this evolution. Budget for an ongoing process—rather than a big sum for the website build and much less for ongoing refinement and improvement.

Start by Telling Prospective Partners About Yourself

Regardless of what you're looking for, it's important for bidders to understand your destination, and who you are as a DMO. This starts with a clear description of your destination's unique elements, experience and offerings—what sets your destination apart and makes it appealing for visitors. This should be reflected in a description of the destination's brand—its values, attributes and positioning.

In addition, each destination has individual issues and needs and faces differing challenges and opportunities. DMOs vary significantly in how they are structured, how they're funded and what responsibilities they have.

As a baseline in your RFP, you should consider the following:

- » Define your destination and who you represent
- » Explain your funding
- » State whether you are a member-based organization and what this means to members (and non-members)
- » Provide annual budget information in as much detail as is possible/feasible
- » State whether your budget includes funding for projects other than marketing (destination management responsibilities including operating visitor centers or convention center management, etc.)

Beyond the basics, it's also helpful to provide some information on the "personality" of your organization, the culture of your organization and how you hope to interact with vendors.

Other Issues to Consider in the RFP Process

The RFP process is an opportunity for your organization to address some critical marketing challenges and opportunities. To maximize the positive and minimize potential pitfalls, consider how you will address these issues in the RFP document.

■ Define Results

Describe what success will look like to your organization—how it will be measured and assessed. This should include key performance indicators—specific results you hope to achieve with the solution presented. Ideally, you should include both general and specific goals and measures of ROI. Some examples to get you started:

- » Grow your online or offline audience overall or in specific market segments by X% in 1 year
- » Improve your relative position in audience by X amongst a group of competitor or “benchmark” DMOs (as measured by an independent audience measurement solution)
- » Increase consumer email opt-in lists by X%
- » Grow online orders for visitor guides by X%
- » Grow new meetings business generated by meeting publications by X% over last year
- » Increase the number of views on your site for videos and articles referenced in the guide
- » Focus X% more attention on vacation values, deals and packages for all audiences
- » Increase specific conversions or signals of intent to travel on your website by X% year on year
- » Expand the combined online and offline advertising revenue of your publishing programs by X% over 2 years

To empower the quality of website and online marketing responses further, consider giving access to your Google Analytics on a “View Only” basis to finalists in the bidding process. Providing this level of access is a quick and simple step, and access can be turned off at the end of the process. For many DMOs this information is already publicly shared, so this access can help vendors provide in-depth insights and recommendations based on your current performance.

► Experience and Practical Considerations

You want to know the track record of potential vendors. So, remember to ask for relevant experiences or case studies, references and samples of work done for other destination clients. Ask what clients the vendor has lost in the past three years and why.

Also give bidders the information they need to meet the timing and structure of your RFP. These “basics” should include:

- » Bidding procedures and clear proposal requirements
- » Deadline for Q&A submissions and for proposal submittal
- » Length of contract and renewal options
- » Copy of marketing plan and any relevant research, if available
- » Advertising rate card from previous year, if applicable
- » Required delivery dates

► Handling Local vs. Out-of-City/State/Region Vendors

DMOs want to be good members of their community, including supporting local businesses where appropriate. At the same time, they want to get the best possible marketing solutions for their destination—maximizing the value and results from their investment. If this is an important or topical issue to you, these two priorities are best balanced by adding a Local Business element in the scoring process. This is typically a 10% or 15% component of the bid scoring—assessing the current or planned local presence of each vendor if they are successful. This gives some benefit to local staff and investment, but ensures that firms must be competitive in the critical areas of the RFP (technology, specialist experience, skilled staff, analytics capabilities, etc) to meet the needs of your DMO. It also makes this issue transparent and reduces any political fallout regardless of your final decision.



■ **Give Vendors Clear Cost Expectations**

Finally, be as clear as possible about your expectations regarding the business deal. If you have a number that you cannot exceed, clearly state it.

Explain if the program has historically generated advertising revenue—and how much. Divulge how much advertising revenue from industry partners has offset the costs of your program. If additional funds for new or enhanced program components will be available in future fiscal years, give an estimate if you can. If you don't have a "magic number," offer a more open-ended approach to the business deal so you can explore more options. Just be sure that if you are expecting a particular outcome, be as clear as possible to allow bidders to structure their response as a win-win for both.



Conclusion

We hope that this document will make drafting your RFP easier and more energizing. An RFP should be a process that empowers and facilitates smart ideas and practical solutions. A well-written RFP should meet your immediate needs as well as address future challenges—equipping your DMO to survive and thrive in today's rapidly changing environment.

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↗ Website

MilesPartnership.com

This is the place to meet our team, learn more about the services we offer, peruse our in-depth research library and check out our latest blog post.



↗ Blog

MilesPartnership.com/blog

More than two dozen Miles employees post regularly about new trends, industry insights and best practices in online, mobile, print and integrated content marketing.



↗ Research

MilesPartnership.com/library

We stay at the forefront of tourism trends, conducting independent studies on leisure travel and publishing our semiannual findings in a variety of outlets.



↗ Email

We believe that proactive communication is a key to continuous engagement, so we send out bimonthly emails to keep our clients and industry partners in the loop.

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