

Solicitation breakdown: Better understanding means better business

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Vendors are often confused by the various terms used for solicitations, which isn't surprising since they often differ per state or locality. However, an important first step in responding to solicitations is to understand the difference between them. Whether a request for proposals (RFP), a request for qualifications (RFQ), an invitation to bid (ITB), or one of the many others, each type of solicitation indicates a different level of engagement by the vendor and expectation by the issuing government. Here's a rundown of key solicitation types and their subtle differences.

Request for Information

A request for information (RFI) is an inquiry made by a government entity to the vendor community in order to gather information and better understand a product or capability. An RFI is typically released when the government is unsure of which path to pursue and seeks input from vendors about the business environment, best practices, and current solutions. An RFI is often followed by a formal solicitation, but rarely results in a direct contract award.

Request for Expression of Interest

Similar to an RFI, a request for expression of interest (RFEI) is an optional stage that is carried out before a formal solicitation is released. It may be issued in place of an RFI or after an RFI to gauge vendor interest on a potential solicitation. An RFEI can also be used to gather information about a project and possible solutions, similar to an RFI. In some cases, governments may use an RFEI to short-list vendors for a subsequent solicitation. As a result, it is important to clarify with the government what the purpose of the RFEI is to avoid being excluded from participating in the future procurement process.

Request for Proposals

A request for proposals (RFP) typically occurs when a government needs to implement a service or solution, but is unsure of the best way to do so. Through the RFP process, vendors propose their recommended solution and pricing through a detailed proposal. With RFPs, price is not the only consideration for awarding a contract; the government also considers a vendor's solution, qualifications, previous experience, and any other distinguishing skills. It is important for proposals to be thorough and well defined, as the RFP process allows vendors to set themselves apart from their competition. Negotiations with selected vendors often take place after the proposal deadline, and a contract is ultimately awarded. Governments may also call these types of solicitations requests for offers (RFO) or requests for responses (RFR), but RFPs, RFOs, and RFRs all have the same basic format and are used to meet a business need an entity has.

Invitation to Bid/Invitation for Bid/Request for Bids

Invitations to bid (ITBs), invitations for bids (IFBs), and requests for bids (RFBs) are released when a government entity knows exactly what it wants to procure. This can also be called a request for quotations (RFQ). All of these solicitations include specifications of the government's desired service or solution – including type and quantity – and an award is typically made based on price. As a result, no discussions or negotiations take place with ITB, IFB, or RFBs; therefore, the procurement cycle from solicitation to contract award is typically much shorter than with RFPs.

Request for Qualifications

Requests for qualifications (RFQ) are often carried out as a pre-qualification process in order to identify qualified vendors for a subsequent solicitation. These pre-qualified vendors are placed on a shortlist that the government then uses for future projects. The government sometimes uses these lists for multiple projects and will reopen the RFQ list to new vendors over a period of several years.

In some cases, governments issue draft versions of solicitations prior to releasing the final solicitation. This is done in order to obtain feedback from the vendor community on requirements, technical components, and scope of the solicitation. It is important for vendors to participate in this stage of the process in order to begin building relationships with the government's project and the procurement staff, which can be beneficial when the formal solicitation is released and the vendor selection process begins.

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