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The Big Three Lies Of RFPs

Three “Facts” That Waste Your Time

Answering RFPs is one of the relatively ugly costs of doing business. There are many myths circulating about RFPs, and in particular the best way to win them. Many of them are wrong. Completely wrong and out of date! Since the burden of responding to RFPs usually falls to the SE Community (who call them Really Fast Paperwork), it’s time to look at some of these myths in more detail, and debunk them once and for all. The Big Three RFP lies are:

- a) **9/10 RFPs are biased towards one vendor;**
- b) **If you don’t write it you won’t win it**
- c) **You have to answer (and win) every request.**

Believing these three alleged facts will cost you money, an ever-expanding amount of time and resources, and decrease the morale of any SE team whose job it is to respond to an RFP. You may not agree with my point of view, but it will make you take a fresh look at how you answer.

1. **9/10 RFPs are biased.** Usually the losing sides make a statement like *“it was clearly rigged for our competitor”*. Here is my analogy: I train a youth football (soccer) team. We are one of the best teams, we play in a very competitive league and we win most of the matches we play. Sometimes we do lose. When we lose, the parents blame the referee for making a bad decision or favouring the other team. Yet sometimes we make mistakes and play badly (the children are 11 – it happens!), sometimes we lose to an inferior team that just does everything right and beats us, and sometimes we are simply beaten by a better team. In the eyes of the parents – it is always someone else’s fault – never their own children.

That is exactly the same view that sales and presales teams take when they lose an RFP. Over the past three years I have spoken with almost one hundred IT and business executives about the RFP process. Their responses match my own experience as a former CIO – *“John, we never ever bias an RFP. We can’t afford the consequences if we are caught. There are so many other more subtle ways of influencing a decision if that’s what we wanted to do.”*

A slightly more accurate version of the myth is that “9/10 customers may already be biased towards a particular solution”. RFPs are rarely biased, people are. I do not believe the number is as high as 90%, I think it is more like 50% based on my data so far. Where that impacts the RFP is actually in the scoring process. Read on:

“This is what we do if we absolutely have to change a score. Every factor has to be scored on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) and then weighted. Making the determination of a 1, a 2 or a 5 is fairly clean cut. The difference between a strong 3 and a weak 4 is unclear and a matter of opinion. Upgrading a few 3’s to 4’s for your favorite can make all the difference in the selection process for getting to a short list. No one will ever know!”

2. **If You Don’t Write It, You Won’t Win It.** Seriously? How many RFPs have you written for your customers in the past year? It just doesn’t happen anymore. You can certainly nudge and push an RFP by suggesting during discovery meetings that some feature/function should be made a requirement, and although I still suggest that every SE team has a standard list of questions to supply to a friendly coach in a pre-RFP stage those questions are rarely used.

Think about the creation of an RFP and the history of the RFP process. The basic internal purpose of an RFP is to gather some momentum and collaboration inside the customer to get a project started. It is as much political and psychological intent as it is purchasing intent. It is often the first chance that business analysts have to document requirements they have gathered from the business and the technical users. Once the document is created it is then a common set of requirements that everyone can judge vendors by – to apply a sense of fairness. It is the way to get legal, finance, purchasing and everyone else on the same page.

Now go back 20-30 years. When an IT department wanted to purchase some technology to solve some user’s business problem and needed to issue an RFP – what happened? It was a long drawn-out process. Analysts were tasked with investigating the market and determining who even had something close to the requirements. They had to rely on vendor literature, analyst reports from Gartner, Aberdeen, Giga and the like, plus personal experience. When the RFP was issued, the customer did not know that much about the technology and the solutions. Contrast that with today’s version. The customer is far more educated, thanks to Google and vendor’s websites. They scour user group boards, Facebook and Twitter to research the popularity of a solution before the (electronic) RFP even hits your salesperson’s inbox.

The only way you can “write” an RFP in 2016 is to **virtually write it** through the internet, social media and good-old fashioned personal contact. You are still persuading, influencing, placing and educating (think PIPE!) the customer – but in a far more indirect and subtle way. When you

discover text in an RFP apparently ripped directly from your competitor's website – it's usually because of a lazy analyst, not brilliant competition.

Personal example – I actively encourage people to write positive reviews of my book. I do this to make sure that when someone searches “sales engineering books” MTS comes up #1 in the list because of great Amazon rankings – and also to counter the negative review a competitor placed online.

3. **You Have To Answer Every RFP.** Says who? Usually Sales! I routinely ask presales leaders what percentage of RFPs they know they will never win – but answer anyway. The answer is a staggering **30%**, which is an amazing waste of resource. In [Winning The RFP Game](#) I lay out a number of steps a SE team can take to increase both their win rate and their internal efficiency. In business, one of the fastest ways to go out of business is to say “yes” to everyone. As an individual, you learn to control your time and prioritize your efforts towards those activities that have the greatest payback (subject to managerial preference). When you personally say “yes” to everyone you rapidly run out of time, perform poorly and are heavily stressed. A sales and presales team – working together – cannot afford to say “yes” to every RFP.

Now let's talk about winning. This is a strange statement to make in a sales situation – but you don't always have to win the RFP. It depends on the type of RFP. When the RFP is issued to determine who will source a project – go for a win. Yet more than 50% of RFPs are issued as a gating process – which means they are used to reduce a large field of vendors (often 8+) down to a short list of 2 or 3 who will go to the next stage of demo/present/propose. If all you need to do is to clear the gate that's a different process. Know the difference.

In Summary

Just because you lose an RFP doesn't mean it was biased. Sometimes you just lose – far more often than you think. That is because the 1990's viewpoint of “*you gotta write the RFP to win it*” no longer exists except in the minds of salespeople and sales trainers. It is now a far more subtle form of influence. So when you do receive an RFP, make sure it is really worth answering and perform due diligence and discovery on the document before you open up the laptop to respond. Fewer, yet more targeted RFP responses will lead to more revenue, not less.

**"We can beat gravity, but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming."
– Wernher von Braun, Rocket Scientist.**

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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