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Firms' proposals must adjust to the times

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Not surprisingly, the eroding economy is stemming the flow of RFPs for AOR tasks. In fact, those that are being issued are now more likely to be for project work or inclusion on a roster of several firms. So agencies understandably have to adapt their responses to thrive under these conditions.

Seventh Point, a Virginia-based firm, is reporting greater project assignments in proportion to AOR requests the past six months, says PR director Steve Eisenberg, who joined the agency from Hill & Knowlton earlier this year.

“It is tempting to want to respond to every RFP, as they have become rarer in today's market,” he adds. “However, an agency has to make qualifying an RFP a top priority to ensure that time and money are not wasted.”

The agency must be aware, though, that qualifying is often difficult. Based on previous project work, Seventh Point was well equipped to respond to a recent RFP for a campaign for a public school system to combat underage drinking. Unfortunately, the RFP was poorly written and the issuer was less than forthcoming with additional information, Eisenberg says.

“We spent two weeks putting together an elaborate proposal,” he recalls. “While they were impressed, it was well beyond their means. They did not have the funds to handle it.”

Ultimately, Eisenberg says to ask questions and probe, but be practical. If an RFP is a good fit, assign resources to respond. But if details are limited, also consider if those resources can be better leveraged elsewhere.

Meanwhile, differentiating between multiple firms during the RFP process can be tough. Nancy Bacher Long, president of Dorland Global PR, offers an imaginative solution.

“The most fun I have is when our clients in-corporate a real-world exercise into the RFP,” she says. Essentially, a challenge is put forward by the client and the competing agencies are required to first discuss

that challenge, then provide strategic recommendations.

“You actually engage your team in dialogue with the client, they learn how we think, how we'll interact with their team, and we may even spar a bit,” Long adds. “The client may agree or disagree with the recommendation, but they learn the rationale and how we perform.”

Meanwhile, Cheryl Gale, managing partner of March Communications, a Boston boutique specializing in tech, recently responded to an RFP from a start-up social networking firm planning its public launch for fall 2009.

As part of the pitch, March collaborated with a partner marketing agency and an IR group, issuing a response as a team, with March as the lead. They are currently shortlisted with one other rival heading into the final round.

“The most important thing we've done to win new business in these cases is to demonstrate our ability to fuse seamlessly with another team and, where possible, to pitch another agency,” Gale says.

She suggests providing case studies of successes the agency has had with partner firms, while always eyeing the bottom line.

She also recommends providing a menu of retainer options and itemizing add-on project work, where appropriate. This distinguishes the response because it rationalizes expenditures.

Lastly, in the tight market, never has presentation been more prerequisite, says Michele Harris, founder and CEO of Smarti Solutions, a PR agency search firm specializing in developing RFPs.

“Always get a meeting, or at least a WebEx, and see if there is a meeting of the minds,” she advises. “Don't give a three-hour capabilities presentation; do it in less than 30 minutes. Don't waste time developing a big book; just give the brilliance. And focus on what the client will get for the fee. Return on investment has never been more top of mind.”

Technique tips

Do

Suggest a real-world exercise

Request a conference call, face-to-face meeting, or WebEx to better prepare response

Provide case studies, especially if the RFP requires partnering with other agencies

Don't

Respond to every single RFP

Compete for an RFP unless you have the resources to execute

Run too long with the pitch, the Power-Point, or the proposal documentation