

Managing the RFP Process: FAQs

1. How much time should the whole RFP process take? How much time should each step take (RFP release, proposal due date, written review, oral presentations, final decision, contract award)?

Each state has different rules/schedules based on that particular state's restrictions, funding cycle, etc. Thus, there is no golden rule, but there are some general things that would be helpful for you to consider. The key is to make sure to allow enough time in each step to get the work done. You must plan to include enough time for the whole process so that you are not rushed, but not so much time that it takes too long to have an agency on board. The whole process generally takes anywhere from a month and a half to three months (and sometimes a lot longer if contract negotiations are difficult or if a bidding agency contests the decision).

Here is a general outline of the steps involved and approximate recommended amount time for each step.

- *RFP Release.* You should release the RFP at the earliest point possible so as to get an agency hired as quickly as possible.
- *Proposal Deadline.* You need to allow enough time for the agencies to put together proposals (generally 4-6 weeks after RFP release)
- *Bidder's Conference.* You need to allow enough time to publicize the RFP and get the information about the bidder's conference to the potential bidders. This should fall somewhere in the middle of the 4-6 week period between the release of the RFP and the proposal deadline. This gives agencies enough time after the bidder's conference to determine if they still are interested in submitting a proposal and, if so, to put the proposal together.
- *Technical Review of Proposals.* This should take place immediately after the proposals are due and should allow enough time for the appropriate state staff to complete the technical review, generally 1-3 days depending on the number of proposals and the complexity of the technical requirements. The technical review is conducted to make sure that the proposing agencies meet the criteria specified in the RFP and do not need to be disqualified for any reason.
- *Written Review of Proposals.* The amount of time this takes will depend on how the written review will be structured. However the written review is conducted, it is important to set the dates of the written review well in advance to make sure that all reviewers can attend.

If the review committee will read proposals in a room together, then the written review can begin immediately after the technical review. The amount of time necessary to read, discuss and score the proposals will depend on the length of proposals and number of proposals received, and usually lasts 1-4 days.

If the proposals will be sent to the review committee to read before coming together to discuss and score, then you will need to ship the proposals to the committee and give them time to read the proposals on their own, approximately 1-2 weeks. Again, the time needed for the review committee to discuss and score the proposals will depend on the length of proposals and the number of proposals, but because reviewers will not spend time together as a group reading the proposals, the discussion and scoring might take 1-3 days.

- *Oral Presentations.* You will need to give the agencies that remain after the technical and written reviews time to prepare oral presentations, at least 2 weeks. The oral presentations might also include a review of creative from previous campaigns.

- *Final Agency Selection.* The final decision about the winning agency may be made at the end of the oral presentations based on the scores of the review committee. Some states require a final approval by a state health department or a state contract officer which adds one or several days.
- *Final Contract Signed.* This will vary depending on how much specific information is laid out in the RFP about compensation, scope of work, etc. Other factors affecting how long this takes include how much negotiation with the winning agency is necessary, if the decision is contested by one of the agencies that is not selected, and how many levels of approval are necessary before a contract is finalized. This step could take 1 week or up to a month or more.

It is advisable to wait to notify agencies that they haven't been selected for further consideration until a final contract is signed and not contested. This allows you to consider the second or third choice in case a problem occurs with the top choice.

2. Should we do a bidders conference?

The main benefit of doing a bidder's conference is that you can answer questions at one time with all the potential applicants present. You can also follow up by putting a transcript of the conference or a summary of the answers online. Another benefit of doing a bidder's conference is that it lets you see the people/agencies who may be bidding and gives you a sense of approximately how many agencies might bid on this contract.

The biggest potential negative is the time/energy involved in setting up such a conference. You will want the key health department staff involved in the RFP and contracting process to be present so scheduling a time when all are available may be difficult. In addition, you might not have all the answers available at the bidders conference and will then have to follow up later. One way of avoiding this is to have all questions submitted in writing in advance. Then you can provide answers in person at the bidders conference since you will have had time to prepare answers to questions submitted.

One alternative to holding a bidders conference is to have all questions submitted in writing and then provide answers to these questions online. You can announce the web address in the RFP and make it clear that this is where bidders can find updates/corrections to the RFP and answers to submitted questions.

3. Should we require that the bidding agencies do oral presentations?

Oral presentations are very useful and should be required. They help to identify differences among the agencies that score well in the written review. They also often give you a better understanding of aspects of the agencies that don't always come across in a written proposal, including things like work flow/procedures, creativity/style, technical capabilities, etc.

This is also an opportunity for you to meet the individuals who will work on the account and determine if you have "chemistry" with them. If possible, you should require that the individuals who will be your day-to-day contacts do part or all of the presentation.

4. Should our health department staff do site visits to the agencies?

Site visits allow you to see the work space, feel the tone of the environment in which the agency staff work, and may help you better understand technical capabilities. Some states/organizations have found them to be very beneficial, however, the vast majority of states do not do site visits, and they are probably not necessary unless there are extenuating circumstances.

5. Should the people who do the oral presentations be the same ones who would do the ongoing work if the account was awarded to their agency?

As stated in question 3 above, it is important that you meet the actual people who will be working on the account. You want to avoid being “wowed” by the agency head(s) or other trained presenters, only to find out that you will be working with much lower level staff. You can require that specific people are part of the presentation team (e.g., the financial person, the primary client contact, the creative lead, etc.).

You can also specify a minimum and/or maximum number of people to participate in the oral presentation. Usually agencies will want to include more people, so providing a minimum is not usually an issue. Different states have required a maximum of 5-10 agency staff to present. Some states do not limit the number. You may choose to require that only those people presenting be allowed to attend the presentation, or you may allow additional agency staff to be present in order to answer questions.

In general, you want enough people that you are able to get a clear picture of what the agency has to offer, but not too many people from the agency whose presence is unnecessary. Depending on where the oral presentations will occur, space may be a limiting factor.

6. How should the written proposals be scored?

This is done differently in each state. Some score sheets include a number of categories that correspond to the sections of the RFP. Other score sheets include sections such as agency experience and knowledge, technical capability, previous creative, market research expertise, experience with media campaigns targeting a particular population, budget, etc. Examples of score sheets are attached. In most cases, the state decides how the scoring is done. However, in some cases, the reviewers are given the opportunity to provide input, with the final decisions resting with the health department.

7. How do we manage the written proposals review process?

You have a number of choices about how to manage the written proposal review process, and states have managed this process in very different ways. Some states have reviewers read the proposals in advance, while others have reviewers read the proposals together. Some states allow reviewers to share scores, while others explicitly prohibit this. Some states allow reviewers to change their scores after seeing all of the presentations, while others do not. You may have some flexibility in making these decisions, and some of the decisions will be mandated by state policy. Here are some examples of how other states have worked this process along with benefits and drawbacks:

Reviewers read proposals on their own before coming together, then get together to discuss.

- *Benefits.* The discussion moves more quickly. Reviewers can read the proposals on their own schedule. Reviewers may be able to pay more attention to the details when reading alone rather than reading in a group.
- *Drawbacks.* Reviewers may forget the specifics of the proposals in the time between when they read the proposals to when the group scoring is done. A large volume of proposals has to be shipped or hand delivered to each reviewer. Reviewers must then bring the materials back with them to the review sessions. Some reviewers may not take the time to review the proposals before the review session. If there are a lot of proposals, review committee members may not have the time to thoroughly read each proposal. In that case, you can assign, in advance, one review committee member to report on each proposal to the group and have someone else be a second reporter, to add anything else that the first

reporter missed. These two individuals would be responsible for reading the proposal most thoroughly (although hopefully others have read it, too).

Reviewers read the proposals when they all come together in one room.

- *Benefits.* The proposals do not have to be shipped to reviewers in advance and brought back by the reviewers. Control and confidentiality of proposals are assured. The information is fresh in the minds of the reviewers when they do the scoring.
- *Drawbacks.* Reading in a group can be very distracting and tiring. Different reviewers read at different speeds. There may not be lots of time for the reviewers to devote to each proposal. Because this takes longer than if reviewers come together having already read the proposals, it may be difficult for some review committee members to take so much time all at once out of their busy schedules to participate in the reviews.

Reviewers are allowed to share scores with the committee.

- *Benefits.* One benefit of sharing scores is that it allows a reviewer to gauge how they are scoring against how the rest of the review committee is scoring. The committee can assess if all the reviewers have a consistent scoring methodology and adjust, if necessary.
- *Drawbacks.* One potential drawback of sharing scores is that one reviewer with strong opinions may influence others on the review committee.

Reviewers are not allowed to share scores with the committee.

- *Benefits.* This is sometimes mandated by state contract policy. Not sharing scores may ensure that reviewers are not influenced by scores of other reviewers. This may be more objective.
- *Drawbacks.* The main drawback is that the reviewers may not be consistent in how they are scoring proposals and the review committee is not able to assess if this is occurring.

Reviewers are allowed to change scores after reading/discussing/scoring all the proposals.

- *Benefits.* Regardless of whether scores are shared with the rest of the review committee, it is helpful for reviewers to be able to go back and change their scores after reviewing all the proposals. This is especially true for a reviewer who has never participated in an RFP review. After reading all the proposals, you get a better sense of the range of responses and can go back and view the first few proposals with a better perspective of what is good and bad in each of the proposals.
- *Drawbacks.* This may add a few extra minutes to the process, but is probably worth the extra time. However, it may be prohibited by state contract policy.

Review committee meets in person.

- *Benefits.* It is probably best to have the review committee meet in person. This is a big decision and, for most states, involves a large amount of money and a significant portion of the overall tobacco control program budget. The discussion and interpersonal interaction is an important part of the decision making process.

- *Drawbacks.* This requires that reviewers travel to a central location, which may involve time and travel expenses.

Note: Sometimes when there is no other alternative, one or more reviewers may participate in the written proposal review by telephone. This rarely happens and is not recommended because of the value of having all the reviewers interact in person.

8. How many agencies should we invite to do oral presentations?

Ideally, you will want to invite a minimum of three agencies to do oral presentations to ensure that the review committee has a number of agencies to review. This, of course, is assuming you have enough qualified agencies in the pool. There have been some cases when States only invited two agencies to do oral presentations because they felt that only two were qualified enough to move past the written review.

You will also want to set a maximum number of agencies to present. While it may seem better to allow all of the bidding agencies to do oral presentations, this is not true for several reasons:

- Depending on how the scoring is configured (i.e., how many points are assigned in each phase of the review and whether or not the scores from each phase are cumulative), it is usually not possible for the agencies with lower scores after the written review to be a top scorer after the oral presentations.
- It will be difficult for the reviewers to listen to too many presentations, especially if they know that some of the agencies have no chance of winning the contract.
- It takes a lot of time/money/energy to prepare oral presentations, so it's not fair to ask agencies that have no chance at winning the contract to put this effort into the oral presentation.
- Because you want to select an agency that does well both in its written and oral communications, it is beneficial to eliminate those agencies who don't submit a strong written proposal, even if they might be able to perform well in an oral presentation.
- If the written proposal is of low quality, you may not want to give the impression to the agency that you think their work was good enough to merit the invitation for an oral presentation.

9. How should the oral presentations be scored?

As with the scoring of the written proposals, this is done differently in each state. In many states, reviewers are able to provide a combination of number scores and written comments. In other states, reviewers provide only a number score, but the score sheets leave space for reviewers to make notes that help them determine their scores. Depending on the laws and policies of the state, the score sheets may become public record. Reviewers should be notified of this in advance so they are aware that anything they write will be accessible to the agencies and anyone else that is interested in looking at the score sheets.

You will need to determine how many points to allocate for each phase of the review. You will also need to determine whether the final decision is based on a total score from all phases of review or whether the score in each phase is used only to determine which proposals move forward to the next phase. Some states assign points during the technical review, while others don't score that phase, but eliminate those proposals that don't qualify. In some states, the total score from all phases of the review process (technical, written, oral, creative) is the only factor in determining which agency is offered the contract. This allows you to weigh more heavily one phase of the review by assigning more points to that phase. (Caution: If you choose to weigh the written review more heavily by assigning that phase more points than the oral presentations, be aware that if there is a wide range in the written review scores, the reviewers of the oral presentations may not be able to influence the final outcome because they have fewer points to assign. This eliminates the benefit of having additional input based on the review of the oral

presentations.) In other states, the score on the written proposals review determines which agencies are invited to do an oral presentation, and the score on the oral presentation determines which agency is offered the contract.

Some states do not allow the review committee to make the final decision, but rather ask the committee to make a recommendation. Then the health department makes the final decision. In this case, the reviewers' qualitative comments may be helpful for the health department staff to make a final determination, particularly when the scores are close.

Examples of score sheets are attached.

10. How do we manage the oral presentation review process?

As with the written proposal review process, there are a number of choices and different states have managed this process in different ways. The paragraphs in the answer to question 7 about sharing scores and changing scores are relevant here as well.

Make sure to schedule enough time for each agency to set up (at least 15 minutes) and then do the presentation (1-2 hours). Schedule time for reviewers to ask questions of the agency (30-60 minutes). Reviewers will then need time to discuss and score each presentation (30-45 minutes). And of course, you will need to include some time for breaks, meals, etc. We recommend that it is private and quiet for the reviewers to talk while the next agency has access to the presentation room to set up.

11. What kinds of questions should agencies be given in advance of oral presentations, and which questions should be surprises?

Providing the same set of questions, either in advance or during the presentation, to each agency gives the reviewers some common ground on which to assess and compare the agencies. Questions that agencies should be given in advance include those for which responses require planning, data gathering, alignment with management, or other time-consuming preparation. Surprise questions can be related to their strategic thinking or specific choices/recommendations from the proposal. You should be able to ask them "why...?" related to any part of their proposal because presumably everything they included in the proposal was done with good strategic thinking behind it. Some questions, such as what potential media crises the agency foresees and how they would respond, would be appropriate questions either to provide in advance or to ask during the presentation.

Some states ask agencies to put together *initial* creative ideas, proposed media placement schedule, or other specifics for the oral presentation to help showcase their strategic and creative thinking. We do not recommend that you ask agencies to develop *near-final* creative ad executions as part of their written proposals or oral presentations. In addition to the time/energy/cost on the part of the agency in doing this, it sets an agency in a particular direction without having all the baseline data and input from the state staff.

12. How do we get information to potential bidders?

Most states put the full RFP, along with any edits/updates to the RFP, answers to the bidders' questions, etc. on the contracts section of the state health department web site. Because of the high level of publicity around state tobacco control program dollars, most agencies interested in this work will be aware that you are releasing an RFP. Some states send a copy of the RFP to all top agencies in the state, along with a cover letter inviting them to apply. In addition, there may be publications in your state where government contracts are advertised. If your contract will be large enough and you want to attract agencies from outside your state, you might consider placing an ad in advertising industry publications such as *Advertising Age*, *Ad Week*, or *Brand Week*.

13. What is an ideal review panel?

Many states have specific restrictions or policies that will help determine the makeup of the review panel. Examples of such restrictions include requiring that all or a majority of the review committee come from within state, or prohibiting state tobacco control staff from being on the panel. You will want to have enough reviewers that the committee represents a range of backgrounds/expertise (including someone with minority/diverse population experience), but not so many reviewers that the process becomes cumbersome.

Many states invite people who manage tobacco counter-marketing contracts in other states because they have been through the process before and often can offer good experience. You can ask people in other agencies within your state government that have big advertising or marketing contracts (e.g., tourism, lottery, agriculture, etc.). You may also want to include one or two people from national organizations who have worked with other states on their counter-marketing efforts and can offer a national perspective. For example, representatives from OSH's Health Communications Branch, the American Cancer Society, the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, and other national organizations have served on review panels in a number of states. It is also helpful to have people on the committee who have experience working in advertising/marketing, either on the agency side or on the client side, because they have an in-depth understanding of marketing/advertising campaign development and agency selection, and will also likely be able to see through the glitz of the written and oral presentations.

14. Should the review panel be the same for both the written proposal review and the oral presentations?

This will depend on state regulations and policies. Some states require that the panel be the same for both; others have no such requirement. One benefit of having the same group for both the written review and the orals is that the reviewers can follow up during the oral presentations with specific questions about the written proposals. One benefit of having different groups for both phases is that a new person added to the panel for the oral presentations comes into the process with a fresh perspective and can assess the presentations without being influenced by the written proposals.