

THE MODEL RFP

This chapter explores a traditional request for proposal (RFP) and explains its component parts. Regardless of how you plan write an RFP, this section outlines the essential information you must share with a vendor, and what you need to request.

*The discussion contained here is a section-by-section overview of a traditional RFP. To download a Microsoft Word file of the actual model RFP, created for publication in the November-December 1999 model RFP issue of Library Technology Reports, visit www.techsource.ala.org and click LTR RFP in the right column of the home page. Your login is: *ilsrfp*. Your password is: *julaugo3ltr*.*

Sections of the model RFP

The model RFP was developed as a comprehensive statement of requirements for a mid-sized public library. If you are planning a library system purchase and want to pursue the traditional route of procurement, then this RFP can be copied and modified to fit your library's needs. Most specifications in this RFP are declarative statements that require basic one-word responses from the vendor.

The codes following the numbers throughout the online model RFP indicate the level of priority of each item. These codes not only guide vendors responding to the RFP but also help the library use point counting in the evaluation of responses. Typically, a + (plus) is assigned a value of 3, an * (asterisk) has a value of 2, and no mark has a value of 1.

If you wish to use the model RFP as a jumping-off point for a different type of RFP, this chapter is especially helpful. In each section of the RFP, this chapter also isolates the large questions that the library must ask itself, as well as vendors.

Section I: Instructions to bidders

This first section is the most narrative and allows the library to tell some of its recent history, as well as outline its plans for the future. This section should explain briefly why the library is seeking a new system, and what functionality it desires from the new system. This section also sets forth basic rules and criteria for the vendor's response.

1. Introduction: Who are you and why are you here?

This item introduces the library to bidders. Create an accurate picture of your library, including the number of holdings, staff members, area population, and registered users. Give vendors a clear idea of the daily life of the library: how many visitors enter each day, how many volumes circulate, how many staff members are on duty, and where staff is allocated.

Writers must strike a balance between offering too much detail and being too scant. What should emerge from the introduction is a strong sense of the library's mission and direction, as well as concrete figures about the library's working capacity, facilities, and current systems. Be sure to give a thumbnail sketch of the library's computerized infrastructure as well: how many computers are in use, how they are networked, and what, if any, major hardware purchases are in the offing.

2. Critical requirements: What do you really want?

The essential items that must be present in any bidding vendor's system are listed here. After scanning the list of critical requirements, a vendor should immediately know whether its ILS product meets the library's most basic needs.

Specifications in this item address not only available modules but also alert vendors of what other modules must be supported in the near future. The library states any plans for implementing other capabilities, such as an imaging module or broadcast searching tool. The library also may stipulate that a vendor must be able to support these additional modules in a mandated period of time, usually one year from the contract date.

Any other planned expansions in the library's holdings also should be discussed in this section. In addition, the library can set forth rules to guide the demonstration process for the bidding vendor's product.

In this item, you are not seeking to answer questions—the library is giving the vendor the simplest possible definition of what is desired.

3. Scope of the project: What will the new system accomplish?

This section functions as the library's problem statement; if the library seeks to accommodate a growing user population or improve service in a particular way, state it here.

4. The role of the RFP: How does this document work?

This item states what is included in the RFP and how the library weighs each item in its request. The library should provide an explanation of the codes that accompany each requirement. Whether the library uses an RFP based on declarative statements (as in the online model RFP) or an RFP based on checklists and open-ended questions, codes give a vendor a clear idea of the library's priorities and how price quotations should be listed in the bid. In the accompanying online RFP, specifications are coded with the following:

- + An essential element that is generally available market wide. Absence of this element is a severe disadvantage.
- * A highly desirable element and a major factor in comparing the responses of vendors.

No mark indicates an important element that will be included in the evaluation of responses, but not deemed essential or highly desirable.

- An element of interest, but one that would be passed over in favor of a lower bid price. Should be bid as a deduct alternate.

5. Responses to RFP: How to answer the questions

This item indicates how the vendor will mark its response and includes a warning about vagueness in answers, which will be read as negative responses.

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6. Exceptions: What does the vendor lack?

If the vendor does not meet the specifications set forth in this RFP, the vendor must specifically address this discrepancy in its proposal.

7. Definitions: What does this mean?

The library clarifies terms that will be used throughout, and how vendors will understand their meaning.

8. Proposal submission: What are the rules of engagement?

The library specifies how the vendor will submit a bid and to whom the vendor can direct questions. Establishing authorized contacts for the vendors within the library is important—all communications with vendors during the bid process should be formal, so that the library does not compromise the terms of the open RFP process. These rules must be specific and clear to both vendors and library staff; the library also indicates penalties and consequences for not adhering to these guidelines.

9. Quantities, appropriation, and delivery: What do the numbers mean?

The library states that quantities listed throughout the RFP are estimates only. These estimates do not guarantee what the library will purchase when a selection is made.

10. Prices: How much?

The library states where and how prices will be listed in the bid, and under what (if any) conditions a vendor may resubmit prices after proposals have been opened.

11. Bid bond: How do we know you're serious?

The library requires that a bond equal to a certain percentage of the bid amount (usually 5%) must be submitted with the proposal.

12. Noncollusion affidavit: Will the vendor work independently?

The library requests that vendors adhere to any attached document stating the vendor's intention not to confer with other vendors about the pricing or structure of the bid.

13. Comparison of proposals and discrepancies: What if the numbers don't add up?

If, when comparing products, the library finds a discrepancy between the itemized price and the total price of a system, the library will assume the lowest figure.

14. Nondiscrimination

The library requires that all its contractors fully abide by nondiscriminatory practices.

15. Project schedule: When will the system be ready?

The library requests a detailed project schedule for the first phase of implementation.

16. Guarantees and warranties: If it breaks, who will fix it?

The library specifies what assurances must be present in its chosen system.

17. Installation: When and how?

The library states that the vendor must abide by specifications for installation listed later in the RFP.

18. Award of contract: How do you know you've won?

This item informs vendors of the procedure for awarding the library system contract.

19. Selection criteria: What is important to the library?

This item plainly explains how the library plans to evaluate bids. Criteria include vendor responsiveness, five-year costs, conformity to standards, past performance of the vendor, and so forth.

Discuss any areas of particular concern here. If the viability of a vendor is especially important, the library should explain how it assesses viability (such as the number of installations, financial criteria, and size of development staff).

Some libraries may place importance on a vendor's market strategy, that is, whether the vendor will continue to provide adequate service in the library's market segment. Address those concerns in this item.

20. Rejection of proposals

The library reserves the right to say no to anyone it pleases.

21. Financial statement: Is the vendor healthy?

If the library requires a selected vendor to provide an audited financial statement, stipulate it here.

22. Proposal costs: Who pays for the postage?

The vendor must bear all costs of preparing the proposal and may not pass them along to the library in the bid.

23. Contract: What holds up in court?

This item lists which documents will constitute the legally binding contract between library and vendor (usually the RFP, the vendor's response, the negotiation summary, and any other additional materials).

24. Lease options: What are the other options?

This item requests not only purchase price quotes from the vendor, but system or hardware-only lease prices as well.

Mandatory proposal form

The library creates a mandatory proposal form to aggregate basic cost and legal information in a single document. This form helps the library compare between the basic prices of each vendor's product. The bidding vendor must fill out this form, which requests cost breakdowns, discount totals, projected maintenance costs, and delivery dates.

System requirements

In Sections II through VI about system requirements, the library seeks information about a proposed system's functionality. The major question addressed throughout: can the proposed product accomplish what the library needs?

In the introduction to these sections, the library should define key terms used throughout, explain any symbols that appear, and give vendors instructions to code their responses. Defining and requesting adherence to a standard response code from vendors allows librarians to easily compare responses among vendors. This code also eliminates the possibility of waffling in a vendor's response.

The library also should state what minimum percentage of its specifications (90% to 95% is most common) vendors must meet to remain in consideration.

These specifications are presented as a numbered list of specifications in the model RFP; modeling many of these specifications into a checklist is a good idea for tightening the document and facilitates easier comparison among vendor responses.

Section II. General system requirements

A. The system: What are you shopping for?

In this section, the library defines the basic traits of the system it seeks: what the procurement consists of, hardware requirements, installation basics, system size, configurations, speed, supported platforms, peripherals, data lines, security, language, training, service, and certain standards.

Several of these traits also are specified in more detail later in the RFP, but this section addresses the library's most general needs.

At the current state of development, nearly all ILS products handily meet these basic requirements. Rather than asking vendors what they support, this section can be better constructed as a narrative or bullet points that clearly state these requirements are assumed capabilities of any ILS product.

Checklists also are useful for articulating general requirements. At the end of such a list, however, provide space for the vendor to indicate full compliance with these requests, as well as space for a vendor to explain any gaps in compliance. Vendors need a place to explain their "no" responses; their systems may have eliminated the need in one area by meeting it in another.

B: Modules: What functions are desired?

In this section, the library lays some ground rules for what will be included in the vendor's bid, along with basic assumptions about the bid.

The library must specify which modules it seeks and how the modules will be bid. The base bid is the price quote for the system components that the library is certain of purchasing. The base bid generally includes:

- Acquisitions with online ordering
- Serials control with online claiming
- Cataloging module with OCLC online cataloging interface and authority control
- Circulation with offline backup
- Inventorying
- Web-based patron access catalog
- Information and referral module
- CPU gateway

- MARC, Z39.50, and OpenURL compliance, as well as certain other interoperability standards
- Report generator
- Enhanced library service products: linking systems, portal products, broadcast search tools, and so forth. These products are only included in the base bid if the library has identified them in its major critical requirements.

Any other modules are quoted as options. Modules most commonly quoted as options include:

- Interlibrary loan tools
- Enhanced catalog data
- Enhanced library service products
- Materials booking
- Special files
- Telephone patron notification/renewal
- Patron self-charging

In this section, the library also asks the vendor for information about any other modules the vendor has in development or in current release. These other modules also should be quoted as options in the vendor's response.

The library should stipulate two more important conditions of the bid: first, the proposed system should require no hardware or software replacement to accommodate any of the vendor's other modules, and second, any version changes in the library's operating systems should be included in the vendor's maintenance program and billed as such.

Finally, the library also should request a detailed account of the financial and human resources committed to software development, with a breakdown between staff working exclusively on the ILS and staff working on various companion products.

Section III. Detailed functional requirements: Do the system functions fit the library's needs?

In this section, which is the overwhelming bulk of the RFP, the library tells the vendor precisely what it expects the system to do. These requirements describe the entire function-by-function capability of the ILS.

The model RFP that accompanies this issue extensively covers this territory—in most cases, more than 80 specifications are listed below each function. These detailed requirements comprise the boilerplate content common to many RFPs. Given the current state of ILS development, the majority of these detailed requirements are now generally accepted in all competitive library management systems:

- Bibliographic file
- Cataloging and authority control
- Acquisitions
- Serials control

- Circulation
- Inventorying
- Patron access catalog
- Interlibrary loan (often quoted as an option)
- Information and referral file
- Materials booking (often quoted as an option)
- Special indexes and files (often quoted as an option)
- Management reports
- Report generator
- Interfacing and network capabilities

Section IV. Minimum hardware requirements

In this section, the library tells the vendor what hardware configurations the system must work with.

A. General conditions: What hardware runs the library system well?

The library describes its database size in detail (such as the number of bibliographic records, annual interlibrary loan totals, number of registered patron population) as well as a projected expansion size (usually 25% to 30%) that the proposed product must accommodate.

The library instructs the vendor to include in its bid whatever hardware components are necessary for the system to be operational (such as cables, remote peripheral connections, and cabinets).

The library also asks the vendor for sets of technical and user documentation, and outlines conditions for upgrades to accommodate additional concurrent users. The library requests the vendor to submit quotes for upgrading hardware and operating systems to provide capacity for more users.

B. Central processing unit, console, and printers: What hardware does the library need?

The library lists basic specifications for the hardware included in the system purchase, including requirements for servers, CPUs, and printers.

C. Disk drives and controllers: What fits the library data?

The library states its requirements for the size of the drive or server that will host the library's bibliographic files and other databases.

D. Backup hardware

In this section, the library specifies how and with what hardware the vendor must provide security in case of system failure or data loss. This hardware is usually of a different format than the operating hardware (such as magnetic tape).

E. Power conditioning: Can the system protect the library data?

The vendor must provide a backup server or hard drive to host the library's databases and provide cover in the event of a system failure.

The library also requests that any proposed system protects the library's data

from power surges, spikes, sags, brownouts, or brief blackouts. If any of these disruptions occur, the system must be able to continue functioning. In the event of a long blackout, the system will not allow data to be contaminated or erased.

F. Remote peripherals: How will the system work with the library equipment?

The library asks the vendor to provide minimum requirements for staff PCs, Web-based patron access catalogs, side printers, light pens, and portable terminals. The library specifies any other needs for connecting with portable and remote terminals and requests that hardware and software associated with system backup be included in the bid.

G. Telecommunications: How does the library want to provide access?

The library tells the vendor over which data communication systems it wants the proposed ILS to operate, such as frame-relay systems, voice-grade lines (via regular modem), and point-to-point digital lines. If there are any branch libraries, the library tells the vendor how the branches are connected. The library also requests a Web server to operate the online patron access catalog.

If the library wants to provide telnet access to patrons, it must be specified here, along with how many modems must be included in the vendor's bid to support this service.

Section V. Vendor support

Vendor support specifications must be the most carefully worded sections in the RFP. In this section, the library outlines the vendor's responsibilities for installing and supporting the system. This part of the RFP sets the stage for the working relationship between the vendor and the institution; the library should be explicit in its expectations and requests. By the same token, the library also must confirm it can conform to these guidelines and fulfill its duties.

A. Vendor viability: Is the vendor healthy?

Someone on the library's procurement team should have already conducted a general viability study of vendors in the market, so the library should have a basic idea of any vendor's financial situation. For an official confirmation of viability, the library requests information about the vendor's operations and customers, including audited financial data, résumés of the vendor's project staff, and a complete listing of the vendor's installations from the last four years.

B. Database migrations: How will the transfer work?

The library outlines what it will provide the vendor for the transfer of the library's database and then succinctly lists the vendor's responsibilities, including what hardware the vendor must provide. The library also specifies the initial load size for the database transfer and requests a quote for migrating the library's other records.

C. Delivery and installation: What will the installation process look like?

The library describes, point by point, the delivery and installation process of the new ILS, indicating the library's own responsibilities as well as the vendor's. Because the RFP is a legally binding document, the library procurement team (as well as the library's attorney) must carefully review this section before sending the RFP.

D. Supplies

The library asks the vendor to provide a list of current unit prices of all supplies required for operating the ILS.

E. Training: How much instruction does the library need from the vendor?

The library indicates how many systems operators will be trained at the vendor's headquarters and specifies what capabilities the systems operators must have after training. The library also outlines how much training the vendor must conduct on-site for other key library personnel. The library requests additional materials from the vendor for training other staff in-house.

F. Maintenance: After installation, what are the vendor's duties?

This section of the document should be prepared in concert with the library's information technology (IT) administrator to determine how much maintenance to request from the vendor and how much can be performed in-house.

The library defines what levels of maintenance the vendor must be responsible for, what hours field maintenance will be available, and what conditions the vendor must meet for repairs.

G. Escrow agreement: What if...?

To protect itself from vendor bankruptcy or cessation of product support (usually measured by the frequency of product releases—if the vendor does not release any update to the product for one year, the product is unsupported), the library asks the vendor to provide or place in escrow the source code and system documentation for all applications. In exchange, the library agrees to sign any nondisclosure agreement provided by the vendor.

The library also stipulates that the application software will be written to permit maintenance by other than vendor personnel in the event that the vendor enters bankruptcy or the product is no longer supported.

Section VI. Acceptance and ongoing reliability

This section tells the vendor how the library will assess the success of the product installation, and it outlines the vendor's responsibilities after the system has been installed.

A. Components of acceptance: Does the system pass the test?

The library lists the components of its acceptance tests for the system. The library also can reserve the right to withhold payments until after acceptance tests have been successfully conducted. In the event of repeated failures, the library can stipulate the return of all payments and enter into arbitration against the vendor. The system also may be subject to reliability tests as long as two years after initial installation—failure of those tests can result in withholding of maintenance payments.

B. Methodology: What's on the test?

The library gives parameters for the acceptance test, such as how many concurrent users will be included, how system response times will be measured, and how test results will be logged.

C. Reliability and downtime: Is the system there when the library needs it?

The library gives its definition of a reliable system, as well as how reliability will be calculated. The library also defines downtime and describes how it will calculate overall system downtime.

D. Response times: What speed constitutes great service?

How fast does the system need to work? In this section, the library gives minimum rates of response for different system operations (for example, charge and discharge of library materials should average two seconds at least 95% of the time) and stipulates that these times must be met even when the maximum number of concurrent users (specified in the general hardware requirements) is using the system.

E. Withholding of maintenance payments: What happens when the system fails?

If the system fails to function at the contracted level of performance, the library reserves the right to withhold a percentage of its regular maintenance payments. Conditions that allow for payment withholding can include:

- Failure to meet reliability rates after acceptance tests have been passed
- Failure to meet required response times
- Loss of files or databases due to system failure

Standards

In spring of 2003, the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) published "The RFP Writer's Guide to Standards for Library Systems," a comprehensive inventory of information standards and how to include them in the library's RFP. This excellent guide, created by Cynthia Hodgson, includes specifications that can be added to RFPs, as well as explanations of which standards are appropriate for different library projects.

More sample RFPs

The model RFP hosted online is only one example of a library RFP. Several libraries post their finished RFPs to the Web to assist other libraries in their procurement processes.

California Digital Library

In 1999, the California Digital Library (CDL) created an RFP for a library system to act as a portal for and host the CDL's databases. The CDL RFP is the result of a long, careful planning process and is an exhaustive document. It addresses the needs of a statewide digital library.

University of Wisconsin

This RFP, available as a Word download, serves as a good basic model for a university request and includes planning and evaluation documents.

This guide is available for download at NISO's website, www.niso.org.

To access the model RFP hosted online at www.techsource.ala.org, see page 20.

California Digital Library, www.cdl.org

University of Wisconsin, www.library.wisc.edu:4000/RFP

ILSR sample RFPs,
www.ilsr.com/sample.htm

Educause,
www.educause.edu/asp/doelib/detail_docs.asp?detail_id=5

ILSR Sample RFPs

Although many of the links on this page to general how-to RFP documents have not been maintained, the site offers access to many public, school, and state library RFPs.

Educause

This site provides links to several institutional RFPs. The RFPs listed here aren't strictly library system requests, but librarians and information professionals can gain insight into different ways to organize their requests.

Conclusion

Above all, the RFP is a document that seeks information about solving the library's problems or expanding its services. The areas of functionality outlined in this chapter should be present in any RFP for an ILS, but the model RFP presented here is just one way to organize a request for bids.

The next chapter discusses how to incorporate your library's needs and desires into a well-written document that will help you achieve successful ILS implementation.