

PRWeek

October 28, 2007
(c. 11,328)

A response that rises above the pack

By David Ward

When Whirlpool's director of marketing and PR Audrey Reed-Granger was asked to set up the process for finding a new PR firm to represent the company, she began by figuring out exactly what she didn't want.

"I used to be on the agency side and I hated the RFP process because there was no opportunity to break through the clutter to demonstrate creativity or real strategic thought," she explains. "I promised myself that if I were ever on the client side, I would craft something more meaningful." So Reed-Granger went out and fashioned an RFP that really stood out. She included questions such as, "Name the top five business/marketing books your agency would recommend every [PR] professional should read.

"We had incredible feedback from agencies for putting out such a unique RFP, but we got a lot out of the process, too," she points out. "The face-to-face meetings are nice, but that's a chemistry test. You want your RFP to show how the agency thinks."

Unfortunately for the PR industry these days, Reed-Granger seems to be the exception rather than the rule. While companies are increasingly relying on RFPs, most still don't understand the need to individualize the process.

As a result, many RFP guidelines and questions end up looking the same, regardless of the company or the industry.

"It's almost like the person that's doing them is using the one they used from their last job," notes Access Communications SVP Michael Young. "So there is a lot of consistency of questions."

But as frustrating and impersonal as that makes the RFP process, Tim Munroe, business development director at PAN Communications, says that just because the questions and guidelines may be cookie-cutter, that doesn't mean a firm's responses have to be.

"There are certain sections that are obviously going to be the same in each RFP," he says. "But if you really want to make your RFP stand out, you need to evaluate each one separately and analyze what needs to go into it."

Deborah Brown, Peppercom's MD of strategic development, advises agencies to really take the time to answer all of the questions and provide information that sets your agency apart from all the others participating.

Given the often limiting guidelines of an RFP, some agencies may be tempted to stretch whatever rules or procedures are put in place. But Young cautions, "You really should answer within the guidelines. You do not want to get disqualified because your RFP is 32 pages when the guidelines [call for] 30."

Brown adds, "If you want to include something they're not asking for, my advice would be to contact them or their search consultant. In fact, you need to find a way to keep in touch with the prospect during the RFP process. That's one area where a lot of agencies fall down. Not only does that show your strategic thinking, but it also demonstrates you're very enthusiastic about this opportunity."

Since the RFP may be the first of many steps a company takes before making a decision, it may take a few months before a PR agency finds out its fate.

But even if your firm does not get the account, Brown stresses, "It should be a part of your RFP process to find out [the reasons] every time you do not win a piece of business. It may be that one agency came up with an idea that the others didn't think of, but it always should be a great learning experience. So don't hesitate to ask for that five-minute conversation after the RFP is over."

Technique tips

Do

Have a set process in place to evaluate every RFP that comes in the door

Adhere to the RFP guidelines. Yes, they can be limiting, but you don't want to be disqualified because of a technicality

Follow up after the process is over to find out what your agency did right - and wrong - in replying to the RFP

Don't

Respond to every RFP. Pick the ones that you really want the most

Hesitate to ask questions. RFPs should not be only a mail-in process. Establish a dialogue while preparing your responses

Rush. There's rarely a first-mover advantage, so take time and craft answers that will truly help your agency