

WHAT IS AN RFP AND WHY IS IT WORTH YOUR TIME?

The request for proposal (RFP) is the heart of a library system purchase and represents a coordinated effort between members of the library staff to develop a coherent statement of the library's mission, needs, and expectations.

As librarians are well aware, system purchases are among the most exhaustive, time-consuming processes a library organization undertakes. In addition to a large financial commitment, the library system purchase process demands a great deal of time and patience from catalogers, systems librarians, and information technology staff during contract negotiation, installation, and adjustment.

The three sections in this chapter offer background and basic information about the RFP: the state of ILS development, circa 2003; the current state of the RFP; and last, the state of the vendor response. A library that is well-informed in each of these areas is more likely to produce an effective, on-point request to vendors.

RFP basics

An RFP is a tool used by institutions to purchase products and services by promoting competitive proposals among vendors. The RFP's use, though, extends beyond an institution's procurement process. It, along with the winning vendor's response, serves as the foundation for the working relationship between institution and vendor. This foundation allows both parties to operate under the same agreed-upon solutions, requirements, and schedules set forth in the request and proposal.

There is no single authoritative outline for an RFP, but most include the following sections:

- An overview or summary statement of the problems and needs for procurement
- An administrative information section
- A section of definite technical requirements and information
- Requirements for managing and implementing the project
- Requests for vendor qualifications and references
- A section for vendors to include other relevant information not already specified elsewhere
- Guidelines for contracts and license agreements, including the purchase contract, nondisclosure agreements, and other legal documents
- Appendixes with the institution's relevant information, such as network diagrams, technical requirements studies, and project plan outlines

(Adapted from "The Case for RFPs (When done right...)," by Bud Porter-Roth. Published by Content Management System Watch, May 14, 2002, at www.cmswatch.com)

ILS development

Before beginning an RFP process, a library's purchase team or task force should understand how the ILS market is shaping development. Vendors and librarians have essentially mastered the basic functionalities of library systems.

These same vendors and librarians have reinvented the idea of an integrated library system's capabilities. This trend began several years ago, with the advent of portal products, linking solutions, and enhanced catalog data. These new tools assist the ILS and offer patrons more resource information, more persistent guides for searching, and easier routes to the materials they seek.

Traditional library system vendors are developing these tools or are forming partnerships with smaller companies to provide functionality that dovetails with their ILS products. Collaborations are everywhere in the library market. Vendors, faced with shrinking numbers of new-name sales, are leaning on these new products, which are frequently sold a la carte, to provide revenues.

Although the profusion of new and interesting capabilities is welcome, be aware that vendors are shifting energy and development capabilities toward this generation of products and largely away from the traditional ILS. Ironically, these new products have grown so sophisticated that the technical service and patron interfaces of new broadcast search and portal products are far better than the traditional cataloging technology that underlies them.

Many librarians feel that the ILS as we know it has become a legacy system, and support for it will eventually dissipate. This extreme view may someday hold true for large libraries with vast technical staffs. For the time being, however, the ILS is still the center of a library's operations. The new generation of library tools is designed to work with and enhance the ILS's basic functions.

From a revenue standpoint, multibranch public libraries are more attractive to vendors because they represent a generally lower demand for new development, as the user population is less research-intensive. On the flip side, institutions that belong to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) are prestigious clients for any vendor, but they expect a disproportionately large amount of development for the level of service they pay for.

For the most part, the basic ILS is likely as good as it's going to get. Most vendors choose to offer new enhanced library service products as standalone modules (to coordinate with any regular ILS system in the market) or separate upgrades for customers, rather than bundle them into existing ILS products. This method of selling and marketing products makes sense for vendors, as the enhancement products are priced far lower than an ILS, meaning libraries take on a more limited investment risk, which is important during extended periods of budget cuts.

In the current fiscal environment, few libraries have the freedom to purchase a new ILS, so institutions are relying on vendor upgrades and companion or enhancement products to deliver state-of-the-art service at a lower cost.

As vendors focus their energies on the new generation of advanced library patron services, the proportion of revenues derived from sales of these services is growing. In January 2003, Ex Libris revealed that one-third of the company's revenues now derive from sales of e-content management and search guidance tools. ("What is the title of my column?" David Dorman, *American Libraries*, March 2003)

Because a portal product or linking utility costs less than an ILS, libraries follow a simplified acquisition and purchase process for these products, which is another reason why vendors are learning to love modules and add-ons. RFPs are rare for these products, which often require an investment of only tens of thousands of dollars (as opposed to hundreds of thousands for many large ILS products). Librarians commonly acquire these products by observing vendor product demonstrations and reporting to the library administration.

More information for small libraries

For smaller and special libraries seeking a detailed view into the industry, ALA TechSource published a Library Technology Report that offers a comprehensive guide to the PC-based library system market. "Integrated Library Systems for Smaller Libraries," written by Anne Salter, published May 2003, is available for purchase online at www.techsource.ala.org or by telephone at 800-545-2433, press 5.

When ILS products are sold, the majority of sales are upgrades or product migrations within the existing customer base. The acquisition process is less formal, but for major system migrations a modified RFP is still important for coherently organizing the library's needs and the vendor's responsibilities.

An RFP in such situations is a good tool for keeping vendors honest—your sales rep may be telling you that the new system is great, but an official request for a bid or specification document gives the library concrete details on exactly what the system can do, and how (or whether) it addresses existing problems in the library.

Existing customers comprise the overwhelming majority of a vendor's revenues, and maintenance fees collected from customer libraries are frequently the single most important factor in a vendor's continued health. As the capabilities of ILS products have evolved together across the market, pricing has followed suit. In general, initial prices for ILS products are falling, and significant discounts are increasingly rare (vendors may offer deep discounts to existing customers migrating from a legacy system).

Although initial system prices may be lower, ILS products are not necessarily cheaper—by adding in maintenance costs over five years, many systems are as expensive as they ever were, if not more. Hardware and software are cheaper than ever, and programs are increasingly easier to manipulate and adjust in-house.

Vendor maintenance costs should be shrinking in turn, but all too often, they are on the rise. Throughout the process, be vigilant about maintenance costs—until you have calculated five-year costs with maintenance increases, do not assume that the ILS with the lowest sticker price is the best deal.

Making sense of maintenance costs

The November 2001 issue of Library Systems Newsletter, published by ALA TechSource, has a brief guide to calculating maintenance costs and total costs of an integrated library system over five years. Included also is a discussion of how to negotiate accordingly. Copies can be obtained for \$12 plus \$2 shipping and handling by calling ALA TechSource at 800-545-2433, press 5.

The state of the RFP, circa 2003

An RFP can be a long, sometimes tedious document that is as unpleasant to read as it is to write. To speed the process, libraries work from basic models of RFPs (frequently available on the Web) and plug in their library's unique specifications between standard boilerplates. To be sure, this method saves a librarian from boredom and conserves his or her energy for more important tasks.

Many librarians view the RFP process as a necessary evil, a step in an outdated courtship ritual between institutions and vendors. For the most part, librarians have given up on using the RFP as a tool for extracting meaningful data from vendors, for reasons addressed in the following section.

Library system vendors are only too happy to see librarians weary of the RFP process. Given the choice, vendors would prefer to sell products through product demonstrations and meetings with customers (in the case of enhanced library system products, these sales methods are the standard).

The RFP, however, is still a necessary tool in nearly all library system purchases, especially in the face of numerous new products on offer that layer on top of or coordinate with the ILS. The RFP helps a library get a feel for what is available, how much functionality the library needs, and how much it will have to pay for that functionality.

Smaller institutions are forming cooperatives and consortia at dizzying rates, using their new partnerships to provide patrons with access to a richer world of resources. The RFP processes among these consortia are increasingly daring, as consortia draw on their broad resources of informed staff.

As librarians tire of going through the motions with standard, boilerplate-laden RFPs, many institutions are revitalizing the process by creating nontraditional or hybrid RFPs that assume a basic level of functionality from the available library systems and proceed to ask challenging questions about advanced functions or common problems faced in the daily life of the library.

These new-model RFPs are discussed at length in Chapter 5. In the search for meaningful answers in the vendor's response, these efforts are the most interesting and influential developments in the form.

The state of the vendor response

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, vendors really just want to circulate a one-size-fits-all description of their product, conduct a demo, and sell to you. Vendors dislike RFPs; they perceive RFPs as overlong, time-consuming, rarely original, and generally pesky. What follows is a pessimistic, but realistic insight into the RFP response process.

When the RFP arrives, the bid writer (often among the most junior staff in a library company) begins plugging in answers from the vendor's general information for a product. If the bid writer comes across a question for which the vendor lacks an answer, he or she will scramble to the product developers to find an answer that the bid-seeking library will favor.

The model RFP that accompanies this issue, available online at www.techsource.ala.org, is a standard RFP. This issue seeks to update the form with suggestions and techniques throughout. Access information is on page 20.

In the worst case, the response that emerges is a grab bag of canned answers, with a few attempts to fit square pegs in round holes. Generally, two-thirds of the respondents answer the open-ended questions in the RFP by talking about other products the vendor is developing or selling.

This process sounds lackluster because it *is* lackluster. Unenthusiastic responses aren't entirely the vendor's fault. In the RFP, libraries do not ask questions in a meaningful way, making the ability of vendors to respond in a meaningful way impossible. Chapter 4 of this report discusses techniques for creating more effective RFPs that ask harder, more revealing questions.

Is the RFP worth your time?

Although the RFP suffers from a tarnished reputation among many librarians, the advantages of using an RFP (or other formal procurement document) far outweigh the potential nightmares of dealing directly with vendors.

- An RFP requires a library to examine its problems and issues in greater detail than would normally occur.
- An RFP forces vendors to assemble competitive solutions that not only respond to the stated requirements but also transcend them—providing additional value for a given price.
- An RFP that does not favor one vendor over another allows all to compete fairly from the same set of rules and requirements.
- Because vendors are working from the same set of rules and requirements, the differences between proposed systems are more apparent.

(Adapted from "The Case for RFPs (When done right...)," by Bud Porter-Roth. Published by Content Management System Watch, May 14, 2002, at www.cmswatch.com)

The next chapter of this report outlines the planning process that leads up to the RFP.

START SHOPPING

Integrated library systems (ILS) were once expensive, unruly beasts that required racks of servers, rooms full of computers to store data, and several frazzled systems librarians placing calls to overburdened information technology (IT) staff. A half-decade of fiercely competitive product development and all-over improvements in processor speed and data storage have made these systems smarter, smoother, and somewhat less costly.

The suite of functions (acquisitions, serials control, cataloging, circulation, inventorying, and the patron access catalog) that comprise an ILS is nearly standard by now; few products survive in today's market without this basic complement of functions. For libraries looking to purchase an ILS, this industry standardization has simplified the purchase process. At the same time, this trend also has made the final selection more difficult, since librarians seem to be selecting among equals.

Although implementing and selecting technologies are hardly new to librarians, the ILS purchase process is complex and demanding—it requires patience, careful allocation of responsibilities, and imagination. This chapter discusses how to begin the purchase process, as well as ways for librarians to gain market savvy and use their networking skills before the RFP is even started. This chapter includes sections on:

- Developing a plan and timeline
- Assessing needs
- Gaining market intelligence
- Making requests for information
- Developing specifications
- Working with a consultant
- Working with a consortium

Developing a plan

Because most libraries in the market for a new library management system have likely gone through the acquisitions process more than once before, planning an acquisition can be a too-familiar task. Careful planning is valuable on several fronts—a well-formed and well-announced plan alerts the library staff to its upcoming responsibilities and keeps everyone on task, keyed to a communal deadline. Planning also leads to smooth software implementation and training once the purchase decision is made.

A well-formed acquisitions plan takes a lot of time on the part of library staff and administration. As planning isn't a new exercise for the library, the acquisitions team may be tempted to skimp on time allotted for making a plan. Librarians, like all humans, are creatures of habit. Staff members may feel as if they've been around the block before and may be inclined to plan in an ad hoc way—to just repeat the process from last time.

As anyone who has been part of a software acquisition and implementation knows, though, plans can go wrong in interesting and unusual ways. Plan carefully. Plan formally. Record all dates and deadlines in writing. Better still, record dates and deadlines electronically.

Most office networks have a shared calendar program—use it to keep the involved library staff abreast of where you are in the purchase process and what's on the horizon. During this phase, create a website for the team involved in the purchase process; host the calendar on the site and schedule regular e-mail updates for staff members. Keeping the plan visible and dynamic increases staff investment in the project.

Planning: Still not convinced?

“The alternative to planning is random movement of a series of uncoordinated reactions to external influences. Without planning there is no means of control after implementation has begun.”

—Richard W. Boss, “A Model RFP for an Automated Library System,”
Library Technology Reports, Vol. 35, No. 6

To plan a library system purchase is to make a systemic recipe that has several ingredients: needs assessment, market analysis, synthesis, and specification.

Needs assessment

The first step of the purchase process primarily involves the higher library administration, which determines the intent of this phase: the scope, the amount of time allotted for studying the library's needs, and the budget. Someone, an in-house systems analyst or possibly a consultant, should take the role of the designated expert for this stage. The expert is responsible for assessing the project's feasibility and formulating the library's definition of needs or problem statement. This document will act as the guiding spirit of the RFP.

One person should write the problem statement, or needs assessment, but the document should be critiqued by other members of the staff. The final result will represent the input of several key personnel in the library. Meetings and discussions should be held to resolve errors in and disagreement with the problem statement until a fair consensus is reached. At this stage, the library staff should have a clear idea of what must be accomplished.

Once the needs assessment has been formulated, the statement is brought to the next higher level of management for approval and commitment. Financial and administrative commitment from higher management is vital for the project to continue. Also, the library should not be merely satisfied with a green light from higher management—the librarians managing the ILS purchase should keep the governing body informed of changes or points of progress in the project.

Sending regular, event- and milestone-based updates and reviews is almost like telling a story. By keeping higher management abreast of your progress, you are more likely to ensure their investment in the process and convince them that yours is an active, worthwhile project.

The head librarian on the project also should stay apprised of major personnel changes in the governing body or higher management during the life of the project and be sure to review the project with new presidents, provosts, library boards, or superintendents.

Making the personal gesture to tell the story of your project to new personnel makes a good impression. Writing in the December-January 1999 model RFP issue of *Library Technology Reports*, Richard Boss reminds librarians "commitments are both personal and institutional, and the latter are often shaped by the former."

Once the project gains institutional assent, the head librarian should appoint an experienced and motivated staff member to serve as project coordinator. Although this staff member needs to know the ILS market and its products, selection should primarily rely on the management skills of the individual. The head librarian should budget money and time for brief management training workshops for the project coordinator to hone the coordinator's skills and prepare him or her for the task at hand.

Market and operations analysis

This stage of the process involves analyzing the library's functions and the library system's role in those functions.

How is the library underserved by its current management system? Are there services available that will significantly alter and ease the experience of library users and staff? Will the investment in a new system be offset by increases in staff efficiency or patron satisfaction?

The purchase team should seek to devise and answer such questions and, in the process, develop expertise about current features in the market and costs of new systems. The team should be able to compare different generations of library systems and isolate the essential desired features for the next system.

You're a first-timer?

In the increasingly rare case of libraries automating for the first time, the switch from a manual system to an automated one is major. This guide is written with the assumption that the library is moving from one ILS to another. The companion model RFP at www.techsource.ala.org will be especially helpful to first-time buyers, since it contains comprehensive functional specifications.

The library should examine the ILS market to gain intelligence about development trends, product releases, pricing changes, and vendor health. The first step is to consult publications focused on library technology and integrated systems. *Library Technology Reports* is an excellent place to begin; many current issues directly confront the purchase and management of integrated library products (for example, Marshall Breeding's upcoming January-February 2004 *Library Technology Reports*, "Integrated Library System Software: A Guide to Multiuser, multifunction Systems" and "Integrated Library System Software for Smaller Libraries," by Anne Salter, May-June 2003).

Monthly publications, library-industry websites, and e-newsletters also spotlight ILS development and vendor activity. *Smart Libraries Newsletter*

Breeding's and Salter's work can be ordered online at www.techsource.ala.org/purchase/buy.pl or by telephone at 800-545-2433, press 5.

(formerly *Library Systems Newsletter*) and The Source Online, both produced by ALA TechSource, focus on vendors and products, as well as modular and add-on library management products. Several library publications, including *Smart Libraries Newsletter*, *Library Journal*, and *Computers in Libraries*, produce annual surveys of ILS vendors at the same time each year, generally in March.

Other helpful online resources include Library Technology Guides, created by Marshall Breeding of Vanderbilt University's Jean and Alexander Heard Library. These guides include recent vendor news in the form of searchable, archived press releases. Although D-Lib, an online magazine, has a digital library focus, it also provides a rundown on recent news, as well as internationally oriented articles about project implementations and innovations.

LISFeeds also provides library technology news at a site maintained by librarians Blake Carver and Stephen M. Cohen. This site contains feeds from numerous library news sites on the Web, which can be viewed by clicking the site title in the page's left column.

While librarians are developing intelligence about library products, the project team should learn about libraries similar in size and service that have undertaken similar projects. Communications with staff at those libraries should provide valuable insights into the triumphs and pitfalls of the purchase process.

Attending American Library Association conferences or other professional conferences is a good way to discover and communicate with librarians from similar institutions. Conference attendance also allows library staff to visit vendor booths to see firsthand what products are available and how they work, to collect product literature, and to attend meetings and workshops about procuring library systems.

This stage is primarily about gathering information and getting up to speed with the state of product development before you dive into the RFP. Knowing what's out there helps the library to construct the RFP in realistic terms.

Vendor viability

The library system market has been riding a wave of consolidation for several years. Companies are being purchased by other vendors, are shutting their doors, or are partnering with other vendors to license and sell ILS products. The market appears to be shrinking. At this stage, someone on your library's purchase team should briefly study which vendors are still viable in the market and which are likely to have more limited life spans.

Even though a company is staying in the market, a general industry-wide emphasis on enhanced library products (portals or linking systems, for example) has shifted development and staff resources away from the ILS. This diverting of resources may bode well for the continued existence of the vendor, but it also indicates likely delays in delivery of promised ILS functionality.

Determining which vendors are both viable and actively developing updates for their integrated library systems is one way to narrow the field in a preliminary way (though there are no guarantees your vendor will not hit a rocky patch or be swallowed by a larger vendor a few years down the line).

The Source Online, free at
[www.techsource.ala.org/
index.pl](http://www.techsource.ala.org/index.pl)

Library Technology
Guides,
www.librarytechnology.org

D-Lib, www.dlib.org

LISFeeds,
www.lisfeeds.com

Marshall Breeding's searchable lib-web-cats database allows you to find libraries based on size, type, location, branch numbers, and management system used at the site. Lib-web-cats can be accessed from the front page of Breeding's Library Technology Guides site at www.librarytechnology.org.

More on viable vendors

The June 2002 issue of Library Systems Newsletter offers a comprehensive discussion of assessing ILS vendor viability, written by Richard Boss. This article includes tables of revenues and installations, as well as the author's recommendations about healthy vendors. To order a copy for \$12 plus \$2 shipping and handling, call ALA TechSource at 800-545-2433, press 5.

Revamping requests for information

A proper request for information (RFI) is increasingly rare in the library market, mainly because vendors make much of their product information available on the Internet. RFIs fell out of favor because vendors traditionally gave them cursory attention. The RFI does not seek project bids, making it a less enticing prospect for a bid writer or sales representative.

At this stage in the process, however, a reinvented RFI may give the library some foreknowledge of what systems will be worth their consideration. This time, rather than sending an RFI to vendors, the library will send its requests to similar libraries to find out about their recent (within the last two to three years) library system acquisitions.

Librarians can use their amassed contacts to find peer libraries but also should consult Marshall Breeding's lib-web-cats database, a searchable database that allows you to find libraries based on size, type, location, branch numbers, and management system used at the site. For instance, if you are a Midwestern public library system with six branches and 500,000 holdings, you can search for the same in the advanced search screen.

The new RFI process can be much less formal than the former process; libraries should start with a basic questionnaire and conduct interviews over the phone, face-to-face at a conference, or via e-mail. The desired result is a handful of narratives that should provide basic guidance for constructing the RFP and managing the negotiation and installation processes.

Librarians are only too happy to share their experiences with vendors and products; free advice is a plentiful natural resource in the library community. Exploit it shrewdly and well.

Synthesis

Now that you know what's available in the market, you need to go back to the beginning and revise your needs assessment accordingly. The head librarian and members of the purchase team may feel overwhelmed with options—not only are the desired functions available in the market, but a vast and tempting array of add-ons and separate modules are out there, too. A coherent, systemic plan allows the library to reexamine its first steps and edit as needed.

Were cost assessments on target? Of the add-ons, separate modules and companion products, what does the library need, both in the near- and long-term? The head librarian, plus the counsel of higher management

Lib-web-cats can be accessed from the home page of Breeding's Library Technology Guides site at www.librarytechnology.org.

and staff, must now decide whether to adhere to, expand, or cut short the original needs assessment.

Developing specifications

At this point, the library must begin developing detailed specifications of what it needs from a new system. These specifications should concern how the new system will perform in different situations. Design and details about the backend construction of the systems are secondary concerns; the primary purpose of the specifications document is to list the prospective system's desired functions. These specifications will comprise the RFP in its rudimentary form.

Libraries can write their own specifications or they can retain a consultant. Creating the specification document in-house will most accurately reflect the needs of the library and will assure the commitment of the staff who will work closely with the new system.

A library may prefer to work with a consultant with deep expertise in the library market to develop an RFP that speaks clearly to the actual state of the market. A consultant will know how to write an RFP that is taken seriously by vendors. The library's project leader, provided he or she grasps the market and products, may choose to develop the specifications in-house and hire a consultant to critique the draft after it is written.

Pre-RFP documents

Many institutions issue documents to staff and users to mark the beginning of an RFP development process. These documents function as a predraft of the RFP, and include reasons why the institution seeks a new system, as well as basic lists of desired functionality.

In 1999, when the California Digital Library began seeking a system to host the CDL databases, the library's RFP Steering Committee issued a background paper and RFP checklist to inform staff and solicit input from its librarians and users. These documents are included in Appendix A of this report.

Such documents are especially useful for large library systems or multilibrary institutions, where input is required from a broad community of users and staff.

Working with a consultant

Many libraries choose to work with consultants in developing an acquisitions plan for a library system. Working with a consultant can be costly (from about \$80 to \$150 an hour, including expenses), but it also can ensure the process will be objective, clear, and relatively short. Consultants are involved in about 22 to 35 hours in needs assessment, and an additional 12 to 20 hours in preparations of specifications and the RFP.

Consultants are objective observers who bring expertise and market intelligence to the purchase process; they also have proven modes of analysis and

the ability to hone in on problems with singular concentration (as opposed to staff members, who must balance their regular duties with responsibilities on the purchase team). The American Library Association maintains a directory of library consultants, as do several state library agencies.

Disadvantages of working with consultants include a perceived distance between the library staff and the purchase process. That is, library staff may feel removed and consequently less interested and invested in the process if an outside consultant is guiding the process.

Any consultant would be happy to work more closely with the staff, but the project manager or library head usually maintains a strict cap on the number of hours the consultant spends in staff meetings. Consultants generally give formal shape to the planning process, and the number of hours spent on the project is usually prenegotiated by the library administration.

Because most libraries have been through the initial automation process and frequently seek their second-, third-, or fourth-generation ILS, the need for a consultant seems less pressing each time around. Especially now, as many librarians feel integrated library systems are reaching a plateau of development, consultants aren't seen as necessary to negotiating an increasingly simplified ILS market. Consultants are increasingly hired to advise on digital library initiatives, such as the creation of online image repositories.

This report assumes a library is not working with a consultant. Libraries that do choose consultants will still benefit from incorporating suggestions made here into their systems purchase projects. This report also assumes a library or library system has appointed its own planning team. Planning teams devote part of their time to the planning process and spend much time gathering information about the state of the market and available ILS products.

Time spent in the planning stage becomes longer than it would be with a consultant, mainly because a consultant already has market expertise. The cost of longer planning time cannot be calculated because staff salaries are existing line items in the library's general budget; the overall impact on the library's operations budget is relatively small.

The in-house team may choose to proceed more informally than an outsider would or may vaguely define its responsibilities at the outset. The head librarian can avoid these pitfalls by holding regular meetings with the team to assure that the process is on track and that stated goals are being met.

While developing a team in-house comes at a cost, writes Boss in the November-December 1999 model RFP issue, "the greatest advantage of this approach is that nucleus of knowledgeable people develops within the library itself."

Cooperative and consortial ventures

Vendors are currently selling library management systems to consortia, and ever-larger numbers of libraries are forming buying groups for various library management products. The anecdotal and sales data of the last few years suggest that group purchasing is an idea whose time has arrived.

Because the recent flowering of development in electronic library tools has unfortunately coincided with several seasons of funding cutbacks, libraries are eager to form consortia to collectively pay for enhanced functionality. With consortia and cooperatives, groups of libraries leverage their buying power to access tools they could not otherwise afford.

Cooperative planning for a library management product can vary in scope from planning by several libraries in a community to state- or region-wide initiatives for libraries of many types and sizes. Cooperative planning does not always have to involve cooperative buying, however; libraries may choose to collaborate on data gathering and analysis, but opt to purchase separate systems.

Cooperative planning has several advantages—it may be more systemic than an individual library's plan, and it places a smaller burden on a library staff to research the market. Planning costs also are lower in a cooperative. Such plans may form the bedrock of later plans for linking libraries or sharing resources.

Although risks are diminished, the disadvantages of cooperative or consortial planning and purchasing include a slower pace of acquisition. This slowdown becomes acute close to implementation, when negotiations between a participating library and a vendor hold up the process for all consortium members.

One frequent result of cooperative planning projects is not the purchase of a shared system but of many different ILS products, which are then linked.

Purchasing a shared system can be an effective way to limit capital costs in purchasing a new ILS but not in the way you'd expect. Shared systems rarely cost less unless libraries involved are small because hardware and software are priced in tiers and by the number of user licenses.

The real financial benefit of sharing mid-size systems among libraries is realized from the governmental and foundation grants cooperative and consortial efforts can attract. The bulk of technology grants made before 2001 were for cooperative ventures, largely because they breed resource sharing across a broad population. Cooperative digital library projects are drawing the most grants, for mainly the same reason.

Conclusion

Planning for a library systems purchase is generally an unwelcome task among librarians, but a purchase process that is well-formulated from the outset is less likely to result in disorganization and disaster later on. The team of librarians entrusted with the task of researching the library market should be vigilant researchers and eager newshounds—the more knowledge you have about library system capabilities, the better and more thought-provoking your RFP will be.

After planning is well under way and the library's in-house purchase team (or the library consultant) has developed preliminary specifications, the request for proposal (RFP) begins to take shape. Armed with data from an informal RFI and from market and viability studies, you will have the expertise to ask questions that go beyond ILS-industry boilerplate.

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: *ilsrjfp*. 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.

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`.

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.

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

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.

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

California Digital Library, www.cdl.org

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.

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

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

Educause,
www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/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.

WRITING THE RFP

A request for proposal presents a library with a golden opportunity for solving some or all of its problems. The RFP doesn't just explain the library to vendors—it's a valuable tool for communication within the library, too. The RFP writer's task is to understand the functionality of the integrated library system (ILS) and apply it to the library's needs and mission.

At its best, an RFP helps a library obtain meaningful information for making purchase decisions. At its worst, an RFP yields canned responses brimming with sales-speak. The RFP is only one part in a dynamic purchase process that includes vendor demonstrations, site visits, and meetings—answers on paper cannot accurately convey the look, feel, and intuitiveness of a system.

For a quick, general tutorial on writing an RFP, consult www.internettraining.com/bart2.htm, or search for 'RFP' at TechSoup, a website that addresses the technology needs of nonprofit organizations. TechSoup's content is targeted toward small to medium-sized nonprofits—school or small public libraries are the most appropriate audience for this site.

TechSoup,
www.techsoup.com

This chapter discusses each step in the RFP writing process, focusing on ways to ask intelligent questions.

Making a statement

Although several staff members will contribute to the content of the RFP, the library's purchase team should appoint one person to write the first draft and final document. Working with a single writer ensures that the staff's varying specifications will be translated into a consistent format and language throughout the document.

As he or she begins the first draft, the writer should have materials gathered during the purchase planning process, including the final document from the library's needs assessment, as well as any goal or problem statements. These agreed-upon goals serve as the backbone for the entire purchase, as well as making the task of writing the RFP easier.

In addition to stated goals, the writer also should begin with a clear picture of the library's priorities: what does the library want to accomplish with this purchase, and at what cost? Which library operations cannot be affected or inhibited by the new system? The writer, as well as the entire purchase team, must share a vision of which procedures and workflows may change and what systems cannot change.

By this point, the purchase committee has already held several staff meetings to discuss the upcoming RFP and system purchase. As the purchase team and the writer prepare for the RFP, however, they should appoint representatives from different library units to discuss particular problems or areas for improvement in their units. Some of these concerns may already be addressed in the library-wide goals statement, but others may be unique to certain units. The writer and each representative should work together to develop system specifications for his or her unit.

During the initial draft process, the RFP writer should stay in close contact with unit representatives, as well as technical staff, administrators, purchasing officers, and contract specialists. The RFP is developed in concert with all these personnel, and the writer must adequately address their concerns in the finished document. To accurately represent each department, frequent—but not constant—communication is necessary.

As the writer drafts the first version of the RFP, questions will invariably arise about the particular specifications of each library unit, but refrain from bombarding library staff with dozens of individual inquiries. Instead, the writer should schedule a regular appointment each week (or every few days) for addressing his or her questions with pertinent staff members.

This approach will further convince staff that the RFP writing effort is organized. Staff will be happy to answer a set of questions at regular intervals and will budget time accordingly. (For most people, receiving one e-mail message with eight questions every Thursday afternoon is preferable to receiving eight e-mail messages with one question each throughout the week.) Limiting RFP-related queries to designated periods also helps the writer track which questions have been answered, and when—eliminating the need to ask the same question twice.

At this point in the preparations, the RFP writer and members of the purchase team should issue internal guidelines regarding contact between staff and vendor personnel before, during, and after the RFP is issued. Once word gets out (as it invariably will) that your library is assembling an RFP, expect unsolicited contact from some vendors' sales representatives.

When issuing an open RFP, the library must carefully monitor its contact with vendors to avoid compromising the open RFP process—if a library appears to favor a vendor or if the open RFP seems to explicitly specify one vendor's system, another vendor may challenge the legality of the open RFP process.

Although such instances are rare, a vendor is legally permitted to seek punitive damages against the library. A set of clear ground rules ensures that all communication between vendors and library staff is well-documented and fully aboveboard.

Evaluation criteria

Before drafting the RFP, the writer and the library purchase team must establish criteria and methodology for evaluating vendor proposals. A solid evaluation plan should contain:

- An explanation of how criteria are weighted
- A description of the library's methodology
- An explanation of the finalist selection process
- Requirements for any demonstrations to follow
- Any requirements for site visits and contact with a vendor's current customers
- A list of minimum conditions that must be met for consideration of a product

In assigning weight to criteria, proceed carefully. The criteria should faithfully reflect the library's priorities (as established during needs assessment or

in goal statements). All too often, evaluation criteria are weighted heavily on the most arcane or difficult specifications in an RFP.

Choose what really matters to your library. If the library's first priority is to provide remote patron authentication without disturbing other systems, the most heavily weighted criteria should reflect that. Don't give weight to system attributes that are of little importance to your library—a problem that frequently arises when libraries copy boilerplates used by another institution.

A description of the library's evaluation methodology should include an explanation of the point system the library uses (if any) to tabulate answers and any other information that goes into the process of comparing responses. If your RFP includes open-ended questions that do not result in yes-or-no-type responses, thoroughly explain how those responses will be assessed and included in any point totals.

If you plan to use open-ended or short essay-style questions in your RFP, consult the library's attorney or purchasing officer after drafting your library's methodology statement to ensure that the evaluation method is legally solid. The easiest way to evaluate essay-style responses is to assign point values to responses and include a brief schema that explains what constitutes each point value (for example, a short essay-style response that receives one point out of five fulfills only one of five possible requirements).

As any attorney will attest, using strict, numerically based methods of evaluation (such as scorecards) removes the possibility for ambiguity or bias. Such concerns primarily affect public institutions, which frequently operate under rigid government-mandated procurement processes.

The finalist selection process, in which the library chooses which vendors will be invited to demonstrate their system, also should be based on the numerical outcomes of the RFP evaluation. Many libraries state that the three vendor responses with the largest point totals will automatically be considered finalists.

Demonstration, site visit, and customer contact requirements also should be carefully prepared. Think about how much time to give vendors for demonstrations, whether you wish to provide vendors with a demonstration checklist beforehand, and which vendor personnel you want to participate in the site visit.

Minimum requirements usually indicate a certain percentage of the RFP specifications that must be met (95% is common) for a system to warrant the library's consideration. The library also can list certain basic functions (for example, a circulation module) that must be present in any considered system.

Tips for writing the RFP

Are we there yet?

As the writing process begins in earnest, scan the Web to see what's out there—many libraries post their system RFPs online (start with the list in Chapter 3). Read through available requests to see what approaches are used and which ones your library should emulate.

Contacting several similar libraries through phone or e-mail should yield a handful of RFPs to look through.

For more precise research, use Marshall Breeding's lib-web-cats searchable database at www.librarytechnology.org, where you can search for libraries whose size and type match your own.

A caveat before you copy and paste

After absorbing a few RFPs, one thing will be clear—there's a lot of boilerplate out there. Although you may be tempted to copy another RFP wholesale, don't. Vendors have seen the boilerplate, and bid writers can respond to it in their sleep. If you want a vendor's product to help achieve the unique goals or address the special concerns of your library, then write a unique, original RFP.

After you collect information and are overwhelmed by the size of the task at hand, take a breath (or a coffee break). Remember, your library's RFP doesn't have to be tedious. The RFP is an opportunity to find solutions to library problems or to improve your library's service, workflow, or effectiveness.

After establishing basic functional requirements, an RFP can pose challenging, interesting questions. Even if your library is limited by strict rules governing procurement and purchasing, you can combine standard RFP specifications with provocative questions. Speak with your library's procurement officer to find out how much flexibility you have in the document.

Some notes on language

Because an RFP is a legally binding document, and because it specifies precise needs and functions, an RFP must be carefully worded. Follow these tips before you begin writing:

- **Use all-or-nothing terms sparingly.** Words such as *must* have especially heavy legal weight and should be used infrequently. Terms such as *highly desirable* or *should* are far less legally problematic and will convey your point nonetheless.
- **Require vendors to respond specifically**—relating how their system will operate in *your* library when describing the library environment and workflow. Responses should explicitly address your library's technical platforms, operating systems, and telecommunications interfaces.
- **Tell vendors about your library and ask how their systems will perform** throughout the RFP. Many RFPs consist exclusively of declarative statements, giving a vendor few chances, if any, to explain how its product may be especially suited to your library's needs.
- **Avoid ambiguity.** Each specification should be clear. If you are unsure how to word some specifications, check with any appropriate unit representatives. Make sure you're asking for what you really want.
- **Avoid copying** another institution's RFP wholesale. Not only will a copied RFP fetch unoriginal responses, but many consultants copyright RFPs that they have created. To avoid copyright infringement and numerous other ills, use other RFPs as guides only, customizing your request to your library's needs.
- **Resist your inner Charlton Heston.** A handy rule of thumb as you write the RFP: if a specification reads like something Moses may have found etched on stone tablets (for example, "the vendor shall not be considered viable in the event of the following conditions forthwith"), rewrite it.

Introduction and scope

The first part of the RFP introduces your library and its mission. The scope of the RFP tells vendors which goals the library hopes to attain by implementing a new system. Begin writing a quick narrative sketch of your library (since this is the first draft, you can revise later). Try to convey basic facts of the library—its size, holdings, user population, major activities—in 300 words or less.

Make sure to include any library functions that are particular to your library (for instance, if the library has the largest special collections department in your state).

The introductory section should also include a clear explanation of how responses will be evaluated (covered earlier in this chapter), deadlines and instructions for bids, and a short description of the library's contract practices.

Defining the scope of the RFP not only takes the library's broad concerns into account but also sets basic parameters for the planned system purchase. This section tells vendors what the library expects from the system purchase. One technique for writing this part of the RFP answers the following questions:

- **Who?** Present the basic information about the library and its users, as indicated above.
- **What?** Discuss what the library wants to accomplish with the proposed system, and state the basic functionality that is sought.
- **When?** Provide a rough timetable for implementation, including beta and acceptance testing.
- **Where?** Indicate where the library wants to see improvements—such as better workflow and design features or an easier patron interface. Also describe the size of the library's database, where it is hosted, who owns the content, and any expectations for growth.
- **Why?** Explain the changes or problems that predicate the search for a new system.
- **How?** Specify any deliverables (such as CD-ROMs or customizable websites), as well as basic technical configurations.

Several other basic considerations are briefly discussed in these first sections of the RFP. For a complete listing of what to include, see the description of the model RFP in Chapter 3 of this report.

Developing smart specifications

"There are no systems out there that don't check out a book, so why are we still asking whether they do?"

—Susan Baerg-Epstein, library consultant.
(Telephone conversation, March 23, 2003)

Several years ago, the multitudes of functional requirements in an RFP actually *did* something—not every system had the full complement of functions and features, and these requirements allowed libraries to assess which systems had the largest amount of desired functionality.

These copious requirements also were used to dare vendors into developing something—RFPs were, in part, libraries' wish lists for features and functions. These wish list functions were used to drive system development. Libraries asked for features several times, in hopes that a vendor would finally bite.

In the current library system marketplace, where all systems have nearly identical, fairly robust basic functionality, virtually every system can satisfy basic functional requests. The sharpest differences between systems are generally found in each system's approach (including information and database architecture), look and feel, ease of use, and intuitiveness.

The vintage-style RFP is useful for libraries that have not yet automated their catalog, or for libraries that have not updated their automated system for 10 years or more. For all other libraries (which are likely more familiar with the state of library system functionality), such a grandiose effort is not necessary. This section suggests efficient ways to construct listings of functional requirements.

Checklists

If the library's purchase team has thoroughly researched the current ILS marketplace, the team members will almost certainly have come to the same conclusion: nearly all ILS products meet all basic requirements for functionality.

If your library's procurement rules permit, listing functional requirements in a checklist is a recommended and efficient strategy for affirming basic attributes of systems. By using a checklist as part of the RFP, the bid writers' jobs are simplified—they can instead focus their energies on responding to the substantial questions in the RFP. Bear in mind, however, that checklists should only be used for baseline functions—features common to all vendors' ILS products.

If your library's procurement rules limit the use of checklists in RFPs, developing specifications in checklists for the first draft can be useful. The specifications in checklists should be short and clearly written, with no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation.

After circulating the first draft of the RFP with checklists, the writer can be sure that he or she has accurately conveyed the library's functional needs. Once that draft is approved, the RFP writer can translate each checklist item into the approved format for individual specifications.

Many libraries that send out RFPs with checklists send them out in Microsoft Excel or other spreadsheet formats. If all you send is a checklist, the format would be fine—chances are, however, that the checklists will be combined with meatier requests for vendor input. Spreadsheet formats create headaches for bid writers, who must tweak the spreadsheet to fit in long answers to questions.

Sending an RFP in two portions (for example, one in Microsoft Word, the other in Excel) or inserting a table into a Word document saves time as well as effort. When choosing a format for the RFP, keep it simple. Ask whether you'd rather the bid writer spend his or her time manipulating spreadsheet cells to squeeze in responses or actually *writing* thoughtful responses.

How to ask smart questions

Above all, be specific about what the library wants to know. Clearly explain the library's workflows and connect questions about system functionality to their role in the library environment. By tailoring the questioning to the library's needs and concerns, you'll force vendors to tailor their responses in kind.

Know your library's strengths—what systems should not change as the new ILS is adopted? If certain systems cannot be disturbed, ask vendors to explain *how* their ILS can operate around or in harmony with the library's crucial processes and systems, and not just *whether* their ILS can co-operate.

Most questions about existing systems concern the information technology (IT) department. Find out what the technical staff needs to know about the underlying architecture to properly evaluate vendor responses.

In the same vein, the RFP writer must have (or must develop) a good working knowledge of how IT systems work in the library in order to ask intelligent questions. In composing the RFP, the writer should have diagrams or basic documents from the IT department so that the specifications make sense to the writer and result in clear statements.

Scenarios

The use of scenarios in RFPs has become increasingly popular, but be judicious in their use. Scenarios give the library a rich picture of a system in action and allow greater insight into how systems operate than do simple yes or no questions.

All too often, however, scenarios merely ask questions that the library will ask again during a vendor's product demonstration. If the question seeks to actually see the system, put it aside for any demonstration scripts that will be developed.

In addition, RFP writers frequently pose overly specific scenarios. A poorly written scenario asks something like: A professor and a student place a hold on a book from different remote locations at the exact same time. To whom does the system give the hold, and how does it convey the appropriate messages?

In all likelihood, the vendor will explain that the server accepts requests in hundredths of a second, so such simultaneous situations are virtually impossible. But the library really wanted to know whether and how the system gives priority to certain users and how ensuing notification works.

Well-written scenarios allow the vendor to explain its system and why it's ideal for your library. Scenarios should describe expected events—power outages, lost records, conflicting hold requests—not freak occurrences. Stay focused on obtaining meaningful information from scenarios, and resist the temptation to make vendors squirm and scramble to find answers for next-to-impossible (and next-to-meaningless) questions.

Avoiding pitfalls

The task of writing and issuing a successful RFP is not terribly complex or difficult, but does call for careful planning and sensible, specific requirements. The following list discusses the most common pitfalls in the RFP writing process:

- **Not enough time is spent on vendor education.** Not all vendors are created equal. A vendor's greatest fear is that a solution has already been chosen [by the institution] and that it is wasting its time. This [situation] manifests itself when the RFP inadvertently favors a technology or solution because the team had the most education on that particular technology.
- **Poorly defined requirements.** This [problem] is typically due to two basic reasons. First, see the item above. Second, not enough time is spent understanding and documenting the [institution's] internal requirements... requirements are so broadly stated as to be meaningless to a vendor.

A recent RFP requested that the [system] support output to different formats and devices. When questioned [by the vendor] as to what was meant, the buyer compounded the mistake by requiring that the [system] support not only current formats, but also any future formats that may be developed within the industry! ("Wow, so I might as well file for Chapter 11 right now and get it over with," said one would-be vendor respondent.)

- **Poor coordination among key stakeholders.** Did you forget to bring in the test group until after the contract was awarded? In one RFP, much time was spent on describing developers, administrators, the IT department, but almost no time was spent describing the actual users of the system—the people who would use the system to obtain the information they needed.

When vendors questioned the RFP team about the "users of the system" the RFP team could not adequately define who a user was, what a user would do on the system, how many users there were, how many hits were expected, what the average length of time spent on the site would be, and so forth. In their haste to completely define the "solution," the RFP team forgot the audience.

- **Providing requirements that can't be adequately defined and therefore proposed.** This [problem] typically involves using [ambiguous or impossible] requirement statements...[another] common mistake is to require something like "all products should conform to all AIIIM content management standards..." Without defining the specific standard or set of standards, many vendors will be absolutely clueless as to which standards they meet and which ones they don't meet. (Hence this typical response: "Oh, to hell with it, say we meet them all—they'll never check anyway.")

Given ambiguous or unclear requirements, most vendors will simply say yes, and if questioned will bring out all the issues involved and make the matter so complex that it will never be resolved. This method is in the spirit of "better to beg forgiveness than ask permission," because once a vendor has been selected...little chance [exists] that they will be unselected.

(Text excerpted from "The Case for RFPs (When done right...)," by Bud Porter-Roth. Published by Content Management System Watch, May 14, 2002, at www.cmswatch.com)

Tips from bid writers

Poorly written RFPs don't just hurt libraries, they also tarnish the working lives of vendor bid writers, the staff charged with responding to RFPs. Generally speaking, bid writers don't like responding to age-old boilerplates any more than libraries like writing them.

No one wants to prevent the library from receiving the information it seeks. All too often, the library just needs to learn to ask questions more carefully.

Nicole Lemley-Rautama, bids and marketing coordinator with Ex Libris (USA), gives these four suggestions:

- **The cost of producing paper RFP responses** is incredible. One binder alone can cost more than \$5. Multiply that by the requisite five copies, add printing and tab costs, shipping, and several responses in one year and the cost is immense. Although we ostensibly provide these copies free for libraries, the cost is built in somewhere—in software, maintenance, and so on. Let's explore alternative formats for RFP delivery. CD-ROMs are inexpensive to produce and ship.
- **Standards, and "standards."** Standards compliance is a complex issue, much more so than simply ticking yes or no to a question such as, "Do you comply with Z39.50?" There's a matter of complying with all variations of Z39.50, not just one portion which enables a vendor to say yes. Not only should libraries care about standards compliance, but how it is accomplished and to what depth. How is the vendor involved in standards creation and compliance?
- **Bidder's conferences.** We don't want them eliminated, but we'd like to see them become telephone conferences. These on-site conferences take an enormous amount of time, effort, and money (once again that ultimately comes from the libraries' pockets) to attend said meetings, which sometimes last no more than 30 minutes.
- **Libraries, please include an electronic copy**—in word processing format, most usually MS Word, of your RFP. This RFP will become the basis, in turn, for our response. Answers will be integrated into the original document, and the original will be saved separately, unscathed. This format makes the vendor's response that much more efficient.

Bid writers and marketing personnel from Endeavor and GIS Information Systems (formerly Gaylord Information Systems) contributed the following tips for improve the library RFP experience. (Data collected through phone interviews March through May 2003)

- "We see a *lot* of overkill regarding standards. Z39.50 and MARC 21 are included. Stop asking about them."

Lots of space is consumed in the RFP by specifying, standard by standard, what a system should support. To save time and space, list the standards the system should comply with. The overwhelming majority of libraries seek support for the exact same standards, which are all included in virtually every ILS. Allow a vendor space to indicate or

explain why a particular standard is not supported. (Here's one way to phrase the question: Does your system include support for all the following standards? If not, please identify and explain.)

- "If you're working with a consultant, insist on originality in the RFP. After all, you're paying for it."

Many library consultants have been using the same RFPs for years, and bid writers can easily identify the boilerplates of different consultants. If an RFP has been past the vendor often enough, the bid department already has an MS Word document with the answers, and writer plugs them right in.

- "Don't ask us to explain how we plan to support your hardware environment and expect the response to fit in a spreadsheet cell."

Libraries often require vendors to format their responses in complicated and strange ways. Such format requirements are understandable for public institutions, whose state or government authorities maintain rigid styles for procurement documents, but in other cases, a library's formatting requests seem somewhat arbitrary. Nonetheless, says one bid writer, "We jump through the hoops. We have to."

- "If you want a thoughtful response, then give us time to think."

Provide ample time in which to prepare a good bid response. Thirty days should be the minimum turnaround; 45 is preferable. Bid writers observe that many RFPs arrive with seven- to 14-day turnarounds, and note that providing a high-quality response in such a limited time is extremely difficult.

- "Don't ask for the moon unless you're at least somewhat sure we offer it as an option."

If you're willing to spend the money on a product, develop a realistic idea of what it can do. This problem mainly arises in RFPs for new products such as portals or federated search systems. Librarians who send RFPs for these products frequently haven't learned enough about the products as a class. The RFP is intended to gain specific information about a specific type of product, but do due diligence first: find out, in a general way, what's out there.

Vendors receive pie-in-the-sky proposals with wild expectations—a clear sign to the vendor that you don't know what you want. As a result, the vendor is less likely to take you seriously. In these bids, writers spend a lot of time discussing the realities of the systems and what's possible today. Recognize that anything may be possible in the future, but first address what's possible now.

- "Know what you want."

The greatest barrier to a good RFP is that libraries send out bid boilerplates without placing priorities on the functions they want, which is especially true of libraries that work with consultants. A library should know what it's asking for, and it should be sure that every specification in the RFP is something it cares about.

Libraries often copy other RFPs wholesale from another source, but the copied RFP may contain specifications that matter little to the library. When a vendor doesn't support some of those specifications, the library eliminates a vendor based on something it didn't need—resulting in a doubly bad

situation because the library may have eliminated the most suitable vendor, and it may end up paying for something superfluous.

Every question is important in terms of inclusion and exclusion of potential vendors. At the start of the process, the library should be inclusive—you don't want to unnecessarily eliminate a product that might be an excellent match.

The vendor may not bid at all on your project if it can't meet all your specifications. If you've specified something of little to no importance to the library and several vendors can't live up to it, the library will have fewer options to choose from.

Bid writers also contributed a few tips that require little explanation:

- Include the due date and time clearly at the beginning of the proposal.
- Provide a clear, complete address for delivery—not a P.O. box (FedEx and other rapid couriers do not deliver to P.O. boxes)
- Clearly define how many copies of the response are needed and in what format.
- Specify for what period of time the proposal must be valid (preferably in the pricing section).
- Provide an electronic version of the RFP in an editable format; Microsoft Word is preferred.
- Ask for something once, and only once. Many RFPs arrive with a considerable duplication of requirements, slowing the response process.

NEW-MODEL AND NONTRADITIONAL RFPs

As librarians grow progressively more familiar with all aspects of the integrated library system (ILS), many libraries and consultants are turning away from traditional ways of issuing requests for proposals (RFP) and toward different types of procurement documents. Several factors contribute to this trend:

- In general, library staffs now have extensive experience working with the ILS and are more aware of what functionalities are available; many librarians feel that an RFP isn't necessary for learning what a product can do.
- Libraries accept the limitations of the RFP. Procurement efforts are increasingly focused on seeing—and not reading about—how systems work.
- Often, libraries view the RFP solely as a required step in the purchase process, one that results in canned responses and moderately useful information.
- Many library purchase teams would rather spend time writing a brief vendor questionnaire and devising detailed scripts for demonstrations than drafting hundreds of minute specifications.

These newly popular models include two-part documents comprised of an RFP and a separate questionnaire, requests for quotations (RFQs), different types of requests for information (RFIs), and processes that use no single official procurement document, but a combination of interviews, checklists, and scripts.

Also, as the RFP (or other procurement document) becomes less exhaustive, scripts, and scenarios for vendor demonstrations are growing in importance in the system purchase process. In addition to reviewing several types of requests, this chapter briefly discusses different models for hosting vendor demonstrations.

Should you try this at home?

Not every library will find these approaches suitable for their institution, but the majority of these RFP alternatives can easily be adapted to supplant or enhance a traditional RFP. If your library is conducting its system search on the basis of price alone, or if your library wants a turnkey system without knowing much about the back end (common among libraries with small or nonexistent IT departments), these models may not be for you.

If your library is considering passing over nontraditional or new-model RFPs solely because of legal concerns, reconsider. Libraries do not buy systems on the merits of RFPs alone—procurement rules recognize that the process is not 100% objective. If an aspect of the system revealed in the demo clinches the library's choice, the choice is legally valid.

If you are issuing an open document, as long as the entire process is open, no vendor will protest a contract awarded to another company. If the process is not open, the library must clearly state that is the case. Unless the library commits an egregious transgression (for example, if a library sends out an open RFP with specifications clearly written with a particular product in mind), there are no legal conflicts of interest.

Dual-document RFPs

Despite widespread agreement that old-model RFPs are on the wane, many institutions (generally public libraries) are limited by rigid procurement rules. Consultant Diane Mayo of Information Partners, Inc., and other library consultants are working with their public library clients to develop RFP tactics that combine traditional lists of detailed specifications with more essay-style questions.

For Mayo's clients, this two-fisted approach usually results in two documents—one, a shortened, typical RFP that satisfies procurement requirements, and the second, a less formal questionnaire that Mayo describes as the 'tell us about it' document. The second document is comprised of questions the library wants to know that a vendor cannot simply show in a demonstration. Such questions often concern the technical underpinnings of the database or flexibility of formats and functions.

Above all, Mayo says, "I tell my clients that RFPs don't have to take nine months or kill a million trees," noting that most of RFPs created in this format should come in at 30 pages or less. (Telephone interview, April 24, 2003)

Request for quotation (RFQ)

The request for quotation (RFQ) is not a replacement for an open RFP. Sent to a limited number of vendors, it lists specifications for desired functions and seeks price quotations for exactly those specifications.

In 2002, Southeastern Libraries Cooperating (SELCO), a Minnesota consortium of 76 public libraries, used a consultant-created RFQ at the end of its search for a new ILS to replace its 20-year-old DRA Classic system.

As SELCO began its search, says Director Ann Hutton, "we knew we had a sophisticated group of users in the consortium staff who were knowledgeable about the ILS market, so we didn't feel a traditional RFP was necessary." (Personal conversation, May 3, 2003)

Instead of an RFP steering committee, SELCO formed topical groups divided roughly along functionality and operations (one group for circulation, one for acquisitions, and so forth). Each group researched the industry related to its topic to find out what was available. SELCO was careful about not throwing out the baby with the bathwater—each group also studied the functions of the DRA Classic system to isolate what qualities or functions were still wanted.

After comparing their industry findings, the groups narrowed the field of ILS vendors to include in the search process. "We found four vendors whose products and target market fit our needs," Hutton says. "After that, each topical group was charged with developing a nonprioritized list of essential system features, as well as a prioritized list of would-be-nice features."

The groups compiled their lists into a simple yes-or-no checklist and sent it to the four vendors. When the checklists were returned, SELCO found that the responses were uniformly alike—features were either supported by all the vendors or by none. Working with a consultant, SELCO decided to invite vendors to Minnesota to discuss their systems, focusing on four make-it-or-break-it areas: bandwidth, policy, ability to operate in a multitype environment, and interlibrary loan (ILL).

Up to this point in the process, financial considerations were set aside to some degree. The topic groups' earlier research found great similarities in system pricing, so SELCO focused on functionality and system performance instead.

After reviewing the vendor interviews and narrowing the field of vendors to two, the SELCO topic groups refined their original lists of essential and desired functions. These revised lists were given to SELCO's consultant, who translated them into an RFQ with a consistent writing style and clarified the language. With fewer than 15 items under each functional area, the succinct RFQ assumed basic levels of functionality in either system.

Appendix B of this report gives a representative slice of how the lists devised by the Selco topic groups were transformed into the final RFQ.

When RFQs were returned, vendors were invited for demonstrations, and the topical groups voted to select the Dynix ILS.

The SELCO process was successful, Hutton says, largely because of its reliance on collaboration instead of an RFP created by a consultant or small number of library staff. Many librarians in the consortium were reluctant to migrate to another ILS; by requiring broad participation in the process, SELCO involved the hearts and minds of its staff. More than 70 staff served on topical groups, and more than 100 other staff members were involved in focus sessions, brown-bag lunches, and presentations.

"Our collaborative approach to developing our requirements helped overcome general reluctance and allowed everyone to discover what they were missing out on (with the old system)," Hutton says.

Request for information (RFI)

The convergence of functionality in ILS products also has led to the renewed importance of the request for information (RFI). Although many large libraries circulate RFIs at the beginning of their search for a system as they gather information on available products, an ever-larger number of libraries are using a beefed-up RFI in place of an RFP.

Consultant Susan Baerg-Epstein works with her clients to develop RFIs and usually convinces libraries of her approach by asking whose time do they want more of—that of the bid writer or that of the sales and development staff? (Personal communication and correspondence, May 2003) "There are lots of things an RFP can't tell you," Baerg-Epstein says. "The biggest differences among systems are in the approach—how does it look and feel? Is the system intuitive? You can't get that on paper."

Baerg-Epstein helps clients develop a modified RFI that not only seeks the vendors' documentation and product spec sheets but also asks about and explains the particular concerns and problems of the library.

To compose this kind of document, the library must look carefully at its operations and workflow—what functions, if any, are unique to the library? This kind of RFI should isolate for vendors the ways in which your library operates differently from other institutions, and in which ways its operations are standard. Other questions in this type of RFI usually address training and support needs.

When thinking about your library's functions, be truthful. If your library's functional needs are not unusual, say so. For example, in one of Baerg-Epstein's client RFIs, the library assessed that it had no special circulation needs, so the only specification sought for a circulation module was that the system had one.

Rather than gloss over detailed functional requirements, this approach reserves those requirements for on-site product demonstrations, which are discussed later in this chapter.

RFIs to current customers

This kind of RFI does not take the place of the RFP and usually consists of an informal document sent to peer libraries. The customer RFI is sent after the library has evaluated RFP responses and selected vendor finalists. Libraries can use the client lists provided by vendors in the RFP response, or they can rely on informal networking among librarians.

Although less formal, this process should still adhere to basic guidelines set by the requesting library—the customer RFI isn't intended to be a mud-slinging session. This RFI helps libraries prepare for vendor demonstrations and gives the library insight into the eventual training and installation products. Essentially, the library learns how the vendor does business.

Stuart Glogoff, manager of distributed learning projects at Learning Technologies Center, teaches courses about creating library RFPs and offers these suggestions for soliciting client references:

- Request in the RFP a complete list of the vendor's current clients; do not accept the vendor's recommended client list.
- Call around, but do consider that:
 - a. You may be speaking with an individual who is not fully correct in his or her assessment of a system's capabilities: a colleague whose personal recommendation was for the library's second choice may see the consultation as an opportunity to vindicate his or her preference.
 - b. Not every library has installed the most recent version of the system so you may be misinformed about functional capabilities.
 - c. All libraries are not alike: a feature that is not implemented at one site may be critical to you.
 - d. Compare apples to apples when evaluating the hardware platform, support, and performance.

Learning Technologies
Center,
[www.elearn.arizona.edu/
stuart/
ls1398_rfpprocess.html](http://www.elearn.arizona.edu/stuart/ls1398_rfpprocess.html)

Procurement without RFPs

Some institutions follow a procurement process without any RFP-style documents at all. In 1997, Harvard University Libraries began its search for a new system to replace the HOLLIS library catalog. Harvard traditionally eschews RFPs in favor of an evolutionary process that involves multiple site visits, multiday vendor demonstrations, and extensive meetings with system developers.

Because Harvard is a private institution, says Tracey Robinson, head of the Office for Information Technology for Harvard's libraries, "the library is released from the expectation of creating an RFP. We're not required to do it, so we don't." By this point in libraries' history with the ILS, Robinson says, system selection lends itself to a less formal process. "We trust the staff to know the arena well and to be capable of assessing answers in an interactive environment," such as a vendor interview, site visit, or demonstration, she says. (Telephone interviews, May 2003)

In an RFP, there's too much room for misinterpretation and sales-speak, notes Robinson. The purchase committee at Harvard was deeply interested in the backend architecture of the system and had considerable expertise manipulating those elements.

"An RFP is an essentially passive document. We knew what the systems could do, but we wanted to know *how* they work, how they're built. Most vendors' bid departments aren't equipped to answer those kinds of questions in an RFP," Robinson says.

After the first round of evaluations, in which vendors (who had been prepped with a document from the university libraries describing in some detail what they wanted to know) came to Harvard for several days to demonstrate their systems and answer questions about infrastructure issues, the team prepared agendas and lists of questions to be asked at visits to the vendors' home offices. There, the team spoke not only with sales personnel but also with each system's developers and programmers.

After these visits, the team developed a fleet of checklists and scenarios (nearly as extensive and exacting as specifications in an RFP) to be used several times throughout the vendor search process. The checklists were first employed during the team's visits to vendors' installed sites, where roving team members would use the checklists to guide themselves around the system interfaces and functions.

The checklists and scenarios were next used during demos at the university libraries in the second round of meetings with vendors (these meetings occurred after the university libraries had selected and subsequently broke with the vendor when the system did not provide promised functionality.).

Finally, in tests conducted throughout the contract negotiation period, staff followed the checklists while using the system as a way of identifying any missing or inadequate functionality. After reviewing all data, Harvard selected Ex Libris's Aleph 5000 system.

Although this procurement model seems somewhat more relaxed than other models discussed in this report, the same amount of planning goes into the search process. This type of purchase process is not suited for small or public institutions, or institutions with little stake in understanding the underlying

To view these documents online, visit <http://hul.harvard.edu/ois>.

architecture of their library system. A large library (or consortium) with a sizable IT staff capable of doing some development in-house may succeed with an approach like Harvard's, but the library must still have staff who are willing to write exacting specifications for scenarios and checklists that will serve many of the same functions as the RFP.

Nouveau demos: 'Keep 'em honest sessions'

In early 2002, when the libraries at North Carolina State University (NCSU) sought a new library management system, they started with an RFP to vendors. After selecting finalists based on RFP responses and other data, NCSU looked at the customer lists of each of the four finalists to identify what the library considered peer institutions.

NCSU's librarians contacted the peer institutions by phone and e-mail, eventually inviting teams from selected libraries to visit NCSU to talk openly and honestly about their experience with their vendor. Although the original contact between NCSU and the peer institutions was informal, the library prepared agendas, topics for discussion, and lists of questions for the team visits. Selected questions and a sample agenda from one such session are included with this report in Appendix D.

The information and concerns gleaned from these meetings became the basis for the library's demonstration script. Once each vendor finished its on-site sales demonstration at NCSU, library staff would respond with questions or requests turned over in the meeting with the vendor's customer (hence the name 'keep 'em honest sessions').

Few libraries have enough money in their budget for flying in teams from similar institutions, but the value of such sessions can help the library sharpen its questions for vendors and better prepare for the installation and training processes. A library also can achieve the same result for less money by arranging to meet teams from peer institutions at large conferences or professional meetings.

Any library planning such sessions should proceed with tact, however—this demo strategy is more than a nifty way to play gotcha! with vendor sales representatives. At some point in the ILS search process, tormenting vendor personnel may seem appealing, but it is a poor way to begin what may be a long-term relationship between library and vendor. When your library asks questions of vendors during a demo, be cautious, shrewd, and fair.

The library also complemented this list by searching for libraries on the lib-web-cats section of Marshall Breeding's Library Technology Guides site at www.librarytechnology.org.

