
Add a Human Touch When You Respond to RFQs

by Barry Koren, AIA, PhD



Most of us Americans

work for service companies. In fact, the figure is 75% and growing. That growing percentage certainly includes us engineers and architects.

However, too many of us market ourselves and our firms as if we were products. We tell people about the size and location of our firm and projects that the firm has completed. When we send resumes, we often describe ourselves in impersonal terms, giving degrees received, licenses held, and projects completed. You don't get a sense of the character, trustworthiness, and wisdom of the firm's staff. You seldom see personal aspects of professional experiences. You seldom hear stories like the one about the incident that happened two Novembers ago when the phone rang just before 5pm and....

Products (like a new car) can be seen from many angles, touched, heard, and smelled, but a service (like engineering) is invisible and intangible. Products are manufactured far away by people we've never met, but engineering

services are personal and upfront. Henry, our prospective client, speaks with us before he is ready to have us do his engineering work. If we fail him, he's more likely to take it personally than if his new car fails him. "How could John have done that to me?"

Since I've just finished responding to two Requests for Qualifications (RFQs) and am working on a third, I want to tell you about them and how I think this notion that we architects and engineers produce invisible, personal services applies to RFQs.

I received the first RFQ from someone whom I'll call Alicia. Alicia sent it saying that she would like to know what our qualifications are to help her with the project that she described in a couple of paragraphs. She sent it to my client's firm, and presumably others, that were listed in professional directories as doing A/E work on health care facilities.

My first reaction: Terrific. We have someone whom we would like as a client and they want some more information. My second reaction: I don't want to just give her our name, rank, and serial number.

What I really want is to give her just enough information to let her know that we are qualified to do the work and that we're a close enough match to what she needs that it is worth her time to talk with us. Thus, my objective was to send information that would help move us from correspondence to telephone conversation and, later, to in-person meetings. (Put in another way, my objective right then was not to close the deal and

have them select us to be their architect and engineer.)

To know what message I want to send, I need to know something more about her organization's situation. The one-page letter I received hardly scratches the surface. Thus, information gathering is my next task.

The second RFQ came from Henry. I had been talking with him over the course of the last six months, during which time we were in the process of completing a major project for a colleague of his.

In both cases--and probably in almost every case--I believe that the human side of the situation is key. It's individual people like Alicia and Henry who select your engineering firm. And the more similar the contending firms to one another, the more often Alicia and Henry will select on how they feel about the people with whom they will work during the course of the project.

In Alicia's case, I wanted to find out who all the people were who are involved and the way they see the situation. In Henry's case, I went back through my notes of past conversations, spoke to a salesman at a branch office, and received public relations materials (like the company's annual report and advertising pamphlets). I probed the salesman and searched the materials, trying to get as full a picture as possible.

With that glimpse of the two RFQs and my initial reactions to them, I want to switch gears and list seven tips that summarize how I

completed the work.

1. Use the cover letter as an opportunity.

Avoid deadening openings like "It's my pleasure to submit to you our statement of qualifications for..." Boring, boring stuff. The opening is a great opportunity to say something significant. You have the reader's full attention.

2. Keep the focus on the prospective client's needs.

Do this even though it is a statement of your firm's qualifications. The last thing you want to do in responding to the RFQs is to turn your marketing communications into self-centered family-album type portrayals of the projects that you're most proud of.

3. Emphasize the human aspect wherever you can.

Let me illustrate this point by mentioning Aaron's resume, which I included in our Qualifications Statement. Though the entire resume had only four short paragraphs, one of them mentioned Aaron's passionate hobby of painting on canvas. Hence Aaron could, if asked, send Henry quick perspective sketches that would immediately show him what his addition or new parking ramp would look like.

4. Show rather than describe that you provide the fundamentals of good service.

For instance, I tried to demonstrate to Henry that we understand his situation and organization by reflecting back our abilities to help him in terms of his situation. When Alicia mentioned wanting state-of-the-art professional services, I mentioned our design process and objectives, and indicated the further resources that we could access, if they were needed. In other words, I reflected back to Alicia and Henry what I heard each of them saying about their company, situation, and needs.

5. Keep it short and simple and convey the essential messages.

I did not give any more information than is needed to get to the next step in the sales process of having Alicia or Henry as a new client.

6. Put the most important things first.

Once Henry goes glassy-eyed reading your materials, he may never recover an interest in what you have to say. I put the most technical, detailed, and potentially boring and non-people-related information into an appendix.

7. Don't get eliminated for a technicality:

If there are specific questions, answer them all.

I welcome questions about the article or specific situations you're faced with. Also, if you have any stories, news, or marketing tips that you want to share, please let me know.

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