

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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How to Be RFP Savvy

Tips for knowing when (and how) to respond to RFPs

In a different time, a client would hire only one law firm for any and all of its needs. Nowadays, with a saturated market and tightening budgets, clients who need representation are no longer sticking to one law firm for every case.



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JOHN S. SMOCK
Partner, Smock Law Firm
Consultants



As a result, clients are diversifying, looking for who can do the best job depending on the case while meeting their budgetary restrictions.

Cue the RFP, or request for proposal. Law firms may receive a few or up to hundreds of them per year, and they have to decide if and how they will respond.

If you’re receiving RFPs, here are some tips from consultants on the most effective methods for dealing with and replying to them.

DONT ANSWER EVERY SINGLE RFP

Responding to RFPs, especially complicated ones, can take hours of work and energy. There is no guarantee that you’ll obtain the job, and you end up paying your employees for nothing.

Unless you have a good chance at being hired, it doesn’t make sense to send in an answer.

“If you respond to every RFP you’re wasting your time, and you have the same chance as winning the lottery,” says John S. Smock, a Partner at Smock Law Firm Consultants. “You have to selectively respond when you think you can bring something to the client.”

CONSIDER CONTACTING THE CLIENT FIRST

Going in cold on a response is not going to benefit your firm. You should know who your potential clients are and what exactly they’re looking for in the firm they hire.

“You have to have a conversation with the client,” says Peter Zeughauser, Legal Strategist and Chairman of Zeughauser Group. “You need to find out what the most important criteria for their hiring decision will be.”

QUICK HIT 1

You know that your firm is great. However, the client doesn't know that. Don't assume that just because you deliver excellent results to other clients that you're going to be chosen.

Ron Beard, also from the Zeughauser Group, says that it's crucial to make contact, "if for no other reason than to ensure there is nothing that would cause the client not to consider your firm."

To get a leg up on the competition, Zeughauser recommends finding an internal source within the client's company. "See if he or she can share insights with you on what might tip the client in your favor."

BE SPECIFIC, NOT GENERIC

You may have a template for your answers to RFPs ready to go, but the content has to change depending upon whom the client is and what the requirements of your relationship will be. If you send in a generic proposal that doesn't match the client's needs, you're not going to achieve the best results possible.

"It's very important to make sure you respond in the context of the client," says Smock. "The client has its culture and its own way of treating its attorneys. You have to find out the criteria for selection and respond accordingly."

Within the response itself, Beard says you should include an executive summary, which is brief and to the point, as well as providing sufficient detail about the relevant experience of the lawyers who will be on the team.

"[Your law firm] should be clear about the work they want to do for the client. You should explain the issue of coverage, too," says Richard G. Stock, a Partner at Catalyst Consulting.

Zeughauser says you'll also want to incorporate some hypotheticals and how you would solve them. Your firm should find out who the decision maker on the response will be, as well as what his or her predilections are.

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"The most common mistake is generic proposals," he says. "There is nothing tailored to the clients' specific interests. The people preparing it assume that they know what the client wants without asking."

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PETER ZEUGHAUSER

*Legal Strategist and
Chairman, Zeughauser
Group*



INDICATE YOUR PRICING

When it comes to pricing, your firm needs to come up with a comprehensive plan. The prospective client is probably going to try to get you to work for less than you’re willing to, so you need to have a solid pricing plan up front.

“Firms are a little too open-ended in terms of the pricing information they’re willing to put forward,” says Stock. “A lot will say they will take the pricing that the client wants. I like the idea of more detail on some of the fees based on successful performance.”

Zeughauser says that before writing up a response, your firm should find out what’s significant about pricing to the clients and determine what they would be comfortable charging based on the situation.

“Is the total cost of the matter what’s most important?” he offers as an example. “Is it cash flow? Would your firm be willing to do the work at less than your typical rates? How important is winning the case versus getting it solved? If there is an early resolution, does your pricing structure align with that? Is it more important that you’re predictable, or that you get a great result?”

BE HUMBLE

You know that your firm is great. However, the client doesn’t know that. They’re most likely being bombarded with responses from many top-rated firms. Don’t assume that just because you deliver excellent results to other clients that you’re going to be chosen.

QUICK HIT 2

You may have a template for your answers to RFPs ready to go, but the content has to change depending upon whom the client is and what the requirements of your relationship will be.

“On a general tone basis, I still see proposals being written that have a sense of entitlement for the work that existing providers for the client might be communicating between the lines,” says Stock. “Either they did the work before, or they’ve done similar work for other clients.”

Instead of going in with the attitude that you deserve this client’s business, keep in mind that you don’t. Other firms are just as entitled to it as you are. This is a business process, and you have to treat it as such.

“On the positive side, I am seeing more firms prepared to be quite specific in how they are willing to change service delivery and innovate in how they do the work and deliver,” says Stock. “It’s not for no reason that we’re witnessing the arrival of a number of innovation awards for law departments and firms.”

TAKING RFPS SERIOUSLY

Nothing is ever set in stone when it comes to your firm. Your client list is constantly changing and evolving, and you always need to be looking forward on how to encourage expansion.

"If you want to grow your law firm as a business, you have to be able to respond to RFPs very well," says Stock. "Even if you're established, some other firm is going to be anxious to break into your market or eat your market share."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kylie Ora Lobell is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. She covers legal issues, blogs about content marketing, and reports on Jewish topics. She's been published in *Tablet Magazine*, *NewsCred*, *The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles* and *CMO.com*.

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