
P-O-P and RFPs/RFQs: Best Practices in Sourcing In-Store Marketing Programs

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IN-STORE MARKETING
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*While the terms “RFP” and “RFQ” have distinct meanings, many people have come to use them interchangeably. For simplicity, the term “RFP” is used throughout this white paper.

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PREAMBLE

Marketing has always been viewed more as an art than a science.

That perception originated in the early days of mass media advertising, when the majority of consumers could be reached through relatively few channels, and the creativity of the advertising message itself was viewed as the key driver of marketing success or failure.

It has been perpetuated, however, by necessity: While audience measurement, consumer polling and other research techniques have provided acceptable standards for brand marketers to use in assessing success, the difficulty in directly attributing sales growth to any one marketing tactic – let alone to any creative element of a campaign – has made it difficult to assign any “scientific” calculations to the marketing process.

With the fragmentation of traditional media’s once-mass audience into hard-to-target audience niches driving up the costs of marketing, and with little in the way of formulas to quantify their return on that marketing investment, many companies have sought to relieve financial pressures through practices that might yield a quantifiable result: namely, cost-reduction.

Thus, a business function historically evaluated on such intangibles as creativity and innovation increasingly is judged on fiscal certainties. The merits of an advertising campaign, therefore, are evaluated on the expenses required to conduct it, not on the potential impact it might have on the marketplace; marketing agencies and suppliers are evaluated and selected based on their cost projections, not on their strategic insight, creative talents and program management skills.

This shift has had a significant impact on the development of in-store marketing programs. Traditionally, the creation of displays and signs was viewed as a “below-the-line” tactic and sales expense that was to be monitored and managed. In recent years, the leading CPG brands have begun to recognize in-store marketing as a brand-building strategy and a marketing investment to be cultivated. However, the wave of cost-reduction programs is making the older tactic/expense point-of-view even more pronounced, to the point where all aspects of P-O-P are coming to be treated “equally” – i.e., as commodities – be it a simple sign holder or the structural engineering behind a permanent metal-and-wood fixture for a key retail account. In the parameters of the cost-reduction programs discussed above, displays basically are judged only on their costs, not on their potential to drive sales or achieve other marketing goals.

This has led to sourcing reviews that assign greater value to per-unit costs than they do to design quality or creative excellence, and to vendor selections that emphasize price quotes at the expense of expertise and experience.

The Complexity of P-O-P Displays

The ability of branded merchandising programs to substantially increase sales has been proven in countless studies. But merchandising is by no means foolproof. Studies have also shown that some displays deliver no incremental sales at all, and in rare cases even detract from a product’s typical sales performance. It is dangerous, therefore, to assign “commodity” status to such a critical component of marketing.

While P-O-P displays are often viewed as less sophisticated than media advertising or other marketing practices, the reality is that their development frequently is more complex.

For one, displays must succeed at two stages: first by being exciting and practical enough to be accepted and implemented by retailers; second by being sufficiently alluring and functional to induce shoppers to buy.

For another, displays must pass muster for two different and, in more than a few cases, conflicting tasks: how well they function as a marketing tool, and how well they function as a merchandising device. An effective display must present the product in a visually appealing way while withstanding the rigors of the store environment.

In regard to the latter, surveys of both retailers and brand marketers consistently point out that ease of installation and durability are both imperative to success. In fact, ease of installation is often cited as a primary factor in the store-level decision to execute a display program.

As for visual appeal, common wisdom once suggested that in-store graphics and marketing messages – typically referred to as a display’s “creative” – were relatively unimportant or easily could be appropriated from other marketing collateral. This notion, in effect, reduced display development to a commoditized tactic requiring little more than an effective printing process and some sturdy materials.

However, there now is a growing consensus that the proper “creative” can generate incremental sales over and above what is generated by the mere presence of the display. Costco, as an example, forbids vendors to deliver product in single-color, generic boxes, because the chain has found that colors and other graphics can quadruple sales of the product.

In addition, the growing need for product vendors to provide key retail accounts with unique or “account-specific” merchandising programs adds yet another layer of complexity to the process. Displays must be designed with an underlying knowledge of the retail environment in which they will reside.

With the audience of traditional media outlets continuing to decline, and with technological advances providing additional media choices as well as the means with which to control them, most product marketers have identified a greater need to reach targeted clusters of shoppers and consumers, not just a generic mass market. This creates an even greater need for effective marketing at retail.

Furthermore, efforts are under way to develop quantifiable methods for measuring the effectiveness of displays and in-store advertising systems. When such methods are established, the importance of in-store marketing will be greater than it has ever been.

In summary, a P-O-P display cannot be treated as a simple structure to hold products and pre-determined brand messages, because it is an integral, tangible representation of the product it carries – as well as of the retail environment for which it is created. It is not a cookie-cutter manufacturing process, but an intricate, vital marketing strategy.

P-O-P Displays and the RFP Process

Considering the factors discussed above, it is imperative that the design of P-O-P displays be treated as a strategic marketing activity, not as a bid-worthy supplier service (although there are, to be sure, certain aspects of display development that do lend themselves well to the bidding process, such as the sourcing of raw materials or certain display components.)

Similarly, P-O-P specialists should be evaluated using criteria that reward their expertise in producing effective programs that meet retailer requirements and increase product sales, not simply on their ability to produce displays at reduced costs. These companies should be viewed as strategic marketing partners, in much the same way media advertising agencies typically are.

However, economic realities often preclude this from happening. In fact, it is more likely these days for ad agencies to be scrutinized using financial metrics than it is for P-O-P companies to be assessed on their expertise alone.

The most severe method of cost-focused sourcing often comes in the form of the request for proposal, or RFP. Although RFPs can benefit a packaged goods marketer (or other buyer) by streamlining sourcing activities into a concise, formal process, practitioners run the risk of commoditizing the “art” of in-store marketing by focusing too heavily on cost issues. Companies that successfully procure significant cost savings through the bidding process may very well find themselves lacking in return on investment from their display programs. Here’s a hypothetical example:

An RFP attracts two bids, one for a display that costs \$5 per unit, and another for a display that costs \$10 per unit. For a cost-focused company, deciding which bid to award is a “no-brainer.” However, if the \$10 design is so superior that it actually improved execution (displays set up) at retail, the more expensive bid might ultimately prove the more cost-effective option:

- The \$5 display is set up in 300 of 1,000 stores.
- The \$10 display is set up in 625 of 1,000 stores. (It was easier to install and featured graphics more compatible with the chain’s environment.)
- The cost-per-executed display for the \$ 5 unit = \$16.67.
- The cost-per-executed display for the \$10 unit = \$16.

Plus, with more than twice as many displays in stores and connecting with shoppers, the potential for incremental sales lift grows exponentially. Thus, the more expensive display proves to be the better economic choice.

Best Practices in the RFP Process

To serve its mission of identifying and publicizing opportunities to strengthen the industry through better processes, practices and technologies, the In-Store Marketing Institute has decided to address the issue in this white paper. While not an endorsement of the process, it seeks to establish guidelines that will make it more effective and efficient for all involved parties.

The emergence of RFPs as a common method for sourcing P-O-P displays has raised concern among display companies because of the potential for the practice to devalue the development process, chiefly in the following ways:

Overemphasis on cost: RFPs that are handled by corporate procurement officers or outside consultants without significant involvement from marketers and merchandising professionals can potentially overemphasize the goal of reducing costs associated with prior programs and identifying the “lowest bidder.” This focus can result in the devaluation of other vital factors, such as quality, creativity and reliability.

Vague opportunities: A common perception among P-O-P manufacturers is that the RFP process is sometimes used by buyers to reduce costs among the existing supplier base and therefore does not represent a true opportunity for other manufacturers. This perception has been confirmed in more than a few cases, and has led prospective sellers to question the value of participating, given the time, energy and costs involved.

Fostering of unrealistic expectations: Relying solely on a process that judges companies based on similar responses to a set of established specifications leaves the buyer with little ability to accurately assess a seller’s ability to accomplish the required tasks.

Loss of effectiveness: Display programs assigned to less-qualified P-O-P manufacturers can produce inferior results, due to poor design quality, delivery failures or other inadequacies. This can lead to programs that, while financially efficient, are objectively ineffective. It also can result in an inappropriate perception of the value of P-O-P displays within the client organization.

Disincentive to innovate: Bidding to exact specifications hampers the creative process, eliminating the incentive for sellers to propose innovative programs that could exceed the buyer’s expectations. Furthermore, the sometimes murky question of who “owns” the information contained within a response to an RFP has led manufacturers to refrain from innovating beyond the specifications.

The purpose of this white paper is to recommend a set of voluntary “best practices” for buyers and sellers to follow in the RFP process that will help alleviate the aforementioned concerns, thereby enabling consumer packaged goods companies to effectively source both cost-effective and results-effective P-O-P displays. These best practices were developed by a team of P-O-P industry executives in conjunction with the Institute.

– *Peter Breen*
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I. BEST PRACTICES: BUYERS

Buyers are the key drivers in the RFP process, establishing the needs, specifications and sources of supply for P-O-P displays. Therefore, they have an important responsibility to all participants who are involved in and/or affected by the strategic-sourcing process. To that end, buyers are encouraged to follow the guidelines listed below to ensure an effective process and a desirable outcome that is fair to all involved parties:

A. Full Disclosure and Communication

Buyers and sellers should engage in the RFP process in the spirit of full disclosure. This will enable both parties to better understand each other's needs and capabilities, giving the buyer more complete and accurate bids from which to select and sellers a greater ability to assess their suitability for the job. Full disclosure includes, but is not limited to, an explanation of such items as:

- Clearly defined objectives;
- Scope of the business opportunity, including the size of budget in review and the number of suppliers to be selected;
- Disclosure of bid participants;
- Explanation of evaluation methodology and award criteria;
- Key financial and strategic elements;
- Timing criteria and deadlines.

B. Specification of Award Criteria

The criteria to be used in the award decision and the respective importance of each (if relevant) should be clearly specified in the RFP. "Price only" bids may not consider the many other critical factors crucial to a successful P-O-P program, such as design quality and field service. Qualified sellers will more willingly participate in the time-consuming and costly efforts to prepare bids if they have a clearer understanding of what is necessary to win the award. If buyers identify the important criteria, sellers can focus their resources on them. Buyers will benefit by facilitating a better bid-evaluation process, since the award criteria have been established and weighted at the outset. This will reduce the timeline for evaluation and selection, and make the award process more transparent to the appropriate parties.

In theory, this level of disclosure opens the process up for exploitation by opportunistic sellers capable of tailoring bids to respond to the information rather than accurately presenting their capabilities. This issue will be addressed in Section II, Best Practices: Sellers.

C. Pre-Qualification of Participating Sellers

Buyers should only solicit participation from P-O-P manufacturers to which they'd be willing to award the business. Buyers should create a list of pre-qualified sellers prior to the RFP, and define those qualifications within the RFP. Such a procedure would allow the business to be awarded on the basis of other meaningful criteria (as noted above) in addition to price. It also substantially reduces the chances of selecting an inferior seller that can't accomplish the task, since all participants will have met pre-established criteria. Ideally, site visits to potential sellers would be part of the pre-qualification process.

D. Timely Decision Notification

Because they have invested significant resources in preparing their bid offers, all sellers deserve to know the RFP's outcome and the factors behind the selection. Buyers should communicate to all participants their award decisions within a reasonable time after the bid evaluations. Sellers use this feedback to evaluate their competitiveness in the marketplace, and to adjust accordingly. This benefits the buyer by making prospective sellers better prepared in future bids, and by making the marketplace more competitive overall. Timely award decision notification also gives winning sellers ample time to effectively allocate the resources needed to meet the buyer's needs.

E. Complete and Accurate Specifications, Terms and Conditions

Buyers should provide complete and detailed specifications, drawings and even physical samples (which greatly improve the accuracy of specifications) when possible. Incomplete specifications can lead sellers to guess and subsequently quote prices inaccurately. (It also can give too great an advantage to incumbent sellers.) Time spent interpreting ambiguous specifications unduly increases the burden on sellers and can result in the buyer receiving inaccurate bids.

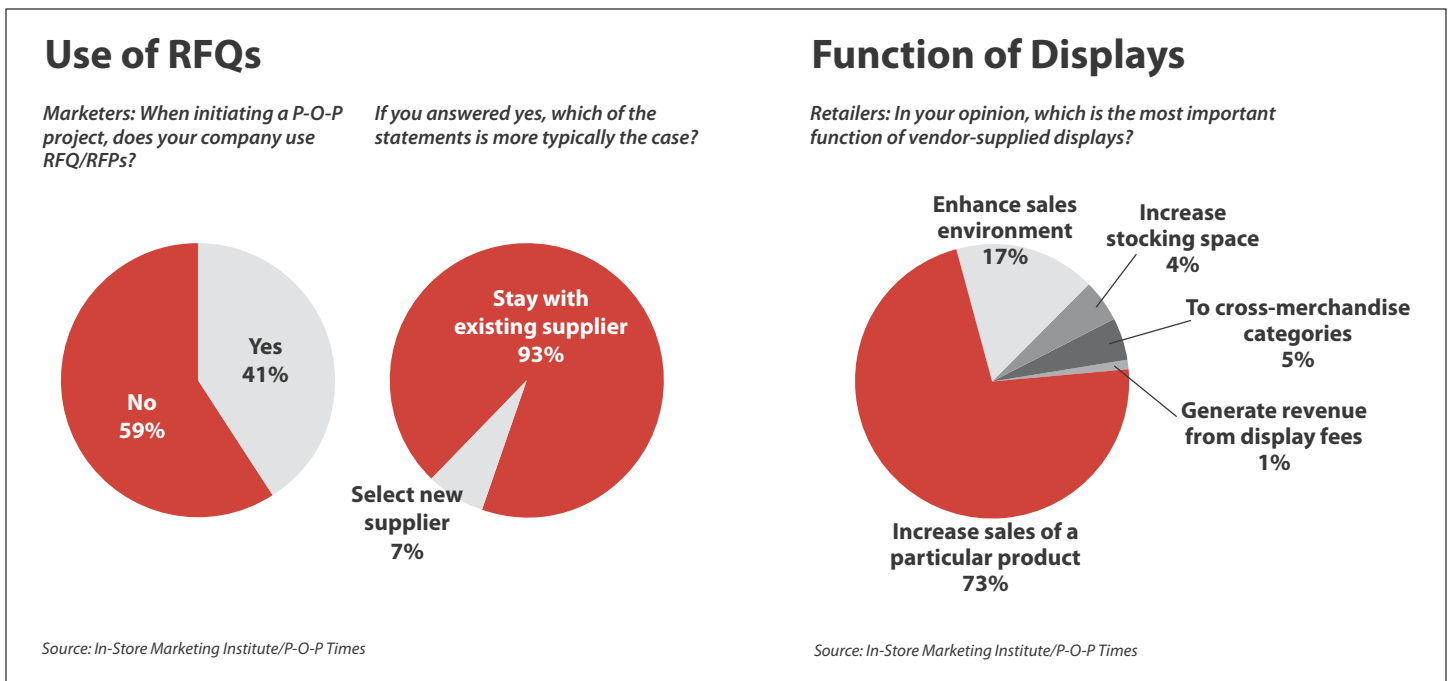
Buyers also should describe all relevant terms that would affect total cost. These include expenses related to rebates, payment terms, pack-out requirements, freight, warehousing, and over-run/under-run requirements, among others. Such factors affect the cost of the seller's offerings and should therefore be disclosed in the RFP to ensure the submission of accurate and fair bids. Buyers should provide thorough specifications, terms and conditions in the RFP to reduce the possible need to make changes later that would alter the bids submitted by sellers.

F. Fair Representative Sample

If the RFP covers multiple projects, buyers should consider using the Pareto principle (the "80/20 rule") by requesting bids for the most important programs. That allows sellers to focus on the most important aspects of the buyer's needs and simplifies the evaluation process for buyers.

G. Simplified Cost Quotes

Buyers should utilize a simplified quote template seeking a breakdown of elements that substantially affect the project’s final cost, rather than requiring detailed information on all of the seller’s business practices and procedures. Although a detailed cost breakdown theoretically helps buyers identify potential areas of savings, it can lead sellers to “force fit” data that complies with the template but does not provide realistic projections. This makes it difficult for the buyer to accurately and fairly compare the true capabilities of various sellers. It also slows down the decision process by requiring an analysis of costs that are immaterial to the project.



H. Single Point of Contact

The buyer should designate a single point of contact who can answer questions and clarify issues. This contact should be familiar with the program up for bid, knowledgeable about its specifications, and accessible throughout the RFP time frame. To ensure fairness to all bidders, this contact would share information consistently with all parties at the same time. This will lead to more accurate, timely and reliable bids.

I. Reasonable Preparation Time

Prior to issuing the RFP, buyers should consider contacting participating sellers to evaluate and determine a reasonable response period for the process rather than simply implementing a standard, arbitrary and possibly unrealistic time frame (e.g. four weeks). Qualified sellers may be engaged in multiple RFPs from other companies that could inhibit their ability to respond by the predetermined deadline. Providing reasonable preparation time would help buyers receive more complete and accurate bids from qualified prospects.

J. No Negotiations Outside of the RFP Process

Sellers understand that they are involved in a time-consuming and costly bid process, but will enter willingly if they believe they have a fair and reasonable chance of winning the business based on the RFP. Therefore, once the process begins, buyers should pledge to award the business based only on the bids submitted. No outside offers should be entertained or negotiations conducted once the process is underway. RFPs whose outcomes are circumvented through outside negotiations weaken the legitimacy of the process, which could make sellers unwilling either to participate entirely or wholeheartedly (the latter manifested in superficial bid submissions). That could limit the buyer's chances of identifying a qualified seller.

K. Confidentiality and Security

All information exchanged between buyers and sellers, including all design specifications and creative ideas, should be treated as confidential. This information should only be used within the parameters and for the purpose for which it is specifically intended. If all parties feel secure when disclosing information, they will be more open and honest. Buyers should request only data that will help distinguish one seller from another to determine their qualifications for the program up for bid. When proprietary information (such as names of executives, labor rates, cost structures, etc.) is required, it should be protected as confidential.

Similarly, design concepts and ideas that exceed the specifications outlined by the RFP should be treated as confidential submissions. To win business, qualified sellers often would be willing to prove their expertise by offering concepts that go beyond specifications and potentially could enhance the buyer's initiatives. Such submissions should be received in good faith and treated as proprietary information.

II. BEST PRACTICES: SELLERS

Sellers in the RFP process are the drivers of competition. They demonstrate a history of performance in design, development, project management, and manufacturing that qualifies them as participants. Sellers not only have a responsibility to the buyers, but also to their fellow sellers.

To ensure that the RFP process delivers accurate and usable information to buyers and establishes a level playing field for all bidders, sellers are encouraged to follow the guidelines described below:

A. Timely Response to Invitation

Upon initial receipt of the RFP, sellers should respond to the buyer in a timely manner either to declare their intent to participate or to decline the invitation. This will enable the buyer to readily assess the pool of participating sellers.

B. Reasonable Response Standards

Sellers should only participate in RFPs when they legitimately have the resources and capabilities to service the customer. If sellers have no experience or capabilities in one or more of the requirements outlined in the RFP, they should disclose to the buyer their core competencies and their limitations. Sellers who submit bids as a method of competitive positioning, or simply to “be in it,” do a disservice not only to themselves, but also to the industry as a whole.

C. Fair and Accurate Representation

Sellers should answer all questions with complete factual accuracy, basing their responses solely on their actual capabilities instead of “conforming” to the specifications. They should not provide a bid unless they are willing to accept the business at the quoted price and upon the quoted terms and conditions. This will save the buyer a significant amount of time, energy, and resources in evaluating bids. It will strengthen the buyer’s ability to award the bid to a seller capable of servicing his needs, and reduce the risk of non-performance. It also will make the process fairer for truly qualified sellers.

D. Incumbent’s Responsibility

Incumbent sellers should inform buyers if they find inaccurate and/or incomplete specifications in the RFP, as well as any material omissions or misstatements. This will level the playing field for all sellers and ensure consistency between what is quoted and what the incumbent seller knows is purchased. Benefits to the buyer include the ability to forecast costs more accurately and budget accordingly. This also will minimize false assumptions by sellers, helping buyers to avoid making mistakes in the selection process.

E. No Negotiations Outside of the RFP Process

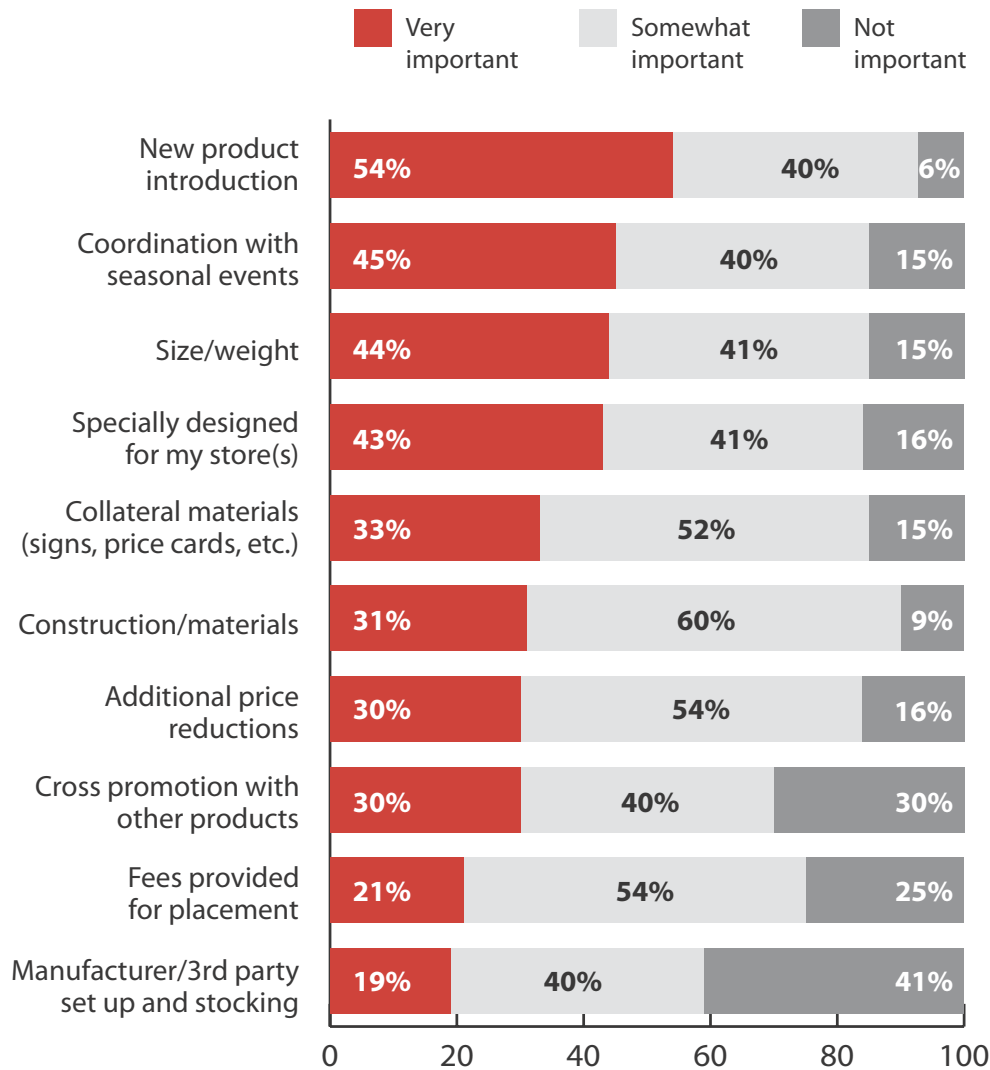
Sellers understand that they are involved in a time-consuming and costly process, but will participate willingly if they believe they have a fair and reasonable chance of winning the business based on the results of the RFP. Therefore, once the RFP process begins, sellers should not seek to circumvent it by entering into outside negotiations with the buyer or the buyer’s representative. This will ensure the integrity of the RFP process.

F. Confidentiality and Security

All information exchanged between buyers and sellers should be treated as confidential and used in the manner and for the purpose for which it is specifically intended (i.e., to respond to and evaluate the RFP). Sellers are encouraged to disclose all information to the buyer that is important to the decision-making process.

Factors in Display Acceptance

Retailers: Which of the following factors are important to your decision to accept or reject vendor-supplied P-O-P?



Source: In-Store Marketing Institute/P-O-P Times

III. USE OF INTERMEDIARIES

One interesting note is that many of these recommended best practices endorse better and more complete communication between buyer and seller. Consequently, they do not address the common practice among buyers of using a consultant or other intermediary to manage the RFP process.

This suggests that the desired outcomes of the RFP process can better be accomplished without the involvement of a third party. While the elimination of an intermediary would promote a “higher fidelity” flow of information between buyer and seller – which can yield more accurate bids and reduce cases of non-performance – it may be a necessary course of action for buyers lacking the personnel, time or other resources to conduct the process themselves.

One major concern over the use of intermediaries is the potential loss in expertise about the display merchandising process. Intermediaries focused on reducing costs for the client may de-emphasize other factors such as quality, creativity and reliability, or may be unqualified to accurately assess them. These factors will have a substantial impact on the ultimate effectiveness of a display program and, therefore, on its eventual return on investment. Buyers should take the necessary steps to ensure that these factors are considered appropriately.

Another concern is that use of a third party introduces an additional set of business objectives to the process. Intermediaries seeking to maximize their own opportunity while servicing the client’s needs may be inclined to infuse the RFP process with their own business drivers (billable hours, for example) rather than focusing solely on results. Buyers should scrutinize the process proposed by intermediaries to ensure that their needs are served efficiently and effectively.

IV. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

These recommended “best practices” for strategic-sourcing requests, or RFPs, in the P-O-P industry have been developed to promote fair and efficient interaction between buyers and sellers. They represent the collective feedback of representatives from 20 P-O-P industry suppliers, who met in February 2005 at the behest of the Institute to discuss the issue, as well as of brand marketers and others involved in the procurement process. The primary intent of this white paper is to provide actionable guidelines that will improve the process and, potentially, the outcomes of RFPs. It will be a welcome byproduct if it also encourages some industry practitioners to reconsider their use.

These recommended “best practices” have the following attributes:

- They model content and objectives that are shared and have been executed by numerous international industry associations;
- They address the most common reasons RFPs are open to failure;
- They represent a balanced approach to corrective action, considering the needs of both buyer and seller;
- They suggest exclusion of the “intermediary” in the RFP process to promote the clear and direct flow of information between buyer and seller.

The fact that industry-specific codes and white papers have been developed by many industries indicates that current sourcing processes (RFPs, in this case, as well as reverse auctions) are not only contentious but have inherent shortcomings in actual practice. The Institute for Supply Management’s “Principles and Standards for Ethical Supply Management Conduct” discourages the use of such ineffective and unsatisfactory approaches and supports collaboration between buyers and sellers to solve problems related to price, quality, availability, timely performance and other factors (ISM, 2002). Laseter (1998) indicates that power-based bargaining tactics may eliminate incumbent supplier lethargy but may create hostility between buyer and supplier – which impedes synergistic improvements. The “price-only” theme of RFPs is perceived by sellers as a devaluation of non-price factors (quality, delivery, creativity, etc.) in an industry for which non-price factors greatly influence the effectiveness of in-store marketing programs.

A caveat: The pursuit of RFP-process reform risks missing a much larger issue. Every day, retailers make qualitative judgments on the value of in-store marketing through their acceptance of and compliance with individual display program elements. And virtually all research conducted to date by the Institute shows that when it comes to retailer control of in-store marketing initiatives, quality does matter. For example, when asked for the factors behind their decision to accept vendor-supplied P-O-P, a whopping 91% of retailers rated “construction/materials” (i.e. quality) as “important.” In addition, the vast majority of retailers surveyed said that the primary function of vendor-supplied displays was “increasing sales.”

In short, display quality affects retailer acceptance, and display execution levels determine whether a brand’s sales and marketing goals can be achieved. Thus, brand marketing managers, strategic purchasing executives and display producers who focus only on display procurement terms without reference to a display program’s potential execution levels, sales performance and profit contribution, do so at their own risk.

The Institute, therefore, strongly recommends and would support a comprehensive study of the factors and circumstances that drive retailer acceptance and physical placement of brand-supplied in-store marketing materials.

V. ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION

This white paper and its inclusive best practices are not unique to the P-O-P industry. Many associations in other industries have drafted similar documents, either as voluntary “codes of conduct” or as white papers, as a collective response to the issues of inefficiency and mistrust inherent in sourcing processes. Although the majority of published documents focus specifically on guidelines for electronic reverse auctions, the issues they cover are also applicable to the RFP process, since the underlying bid preparation and management processes are the same in both cases. Examples include: a) the U.S. auto industry (OESA, 2002), b) the U.S. construction industry (AGC, 2003), c) the European aluminum foil industry (EAFA, 2002), d) the European flexible packaging industry (EF, 2002), e) the European wire and cable makers (EPC, 2003), and f) the Canadian general contractors (CCA, 2001). All industry-specific codes of conduct and white papers, while varied in structure, share the same objective: to ensure that sourcing processes are fair and foster trust between buyers and sellers. The content of these documents are common and focus on the key issues of: transparency, award criteria, specifications, confidentiality and intent.

These recommended “best practices” also address the common flaws in strategic sourcing processes noted in current research, namely: inadequate up-front planning, poor category selection, unclear specifications, ambiguous award-decision rules, unqualified bidder participation, and acceptance of unrealistic bids (Beall, 2003). Addressing these potential flaws will ensure process integrity and assist in the successful implementation of award selections.

A common theme that emerges from these best practices is that sellers want to expend their time and resources on the factors most important to buyers, to ensure reliable bids that will minimize the risk of non-performance (inferior quality, delivery failures, etc.). Sellers ask for reasonable preparation time, complete specifications, and clear award-decision criteria in order to more readily assess the opportunity and better allocate appropriate resources to a meaningful task. Buyers benefit in turn by obtaining more accurate and reliable bids, which reduces the likelihood of non-performance in the implementation stages of the RFP process.

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