

## How to write a Request For Proposal

### INTRODUCTION

This document was prepared in order to assist clients in their submittal of a Request For Proposal. Our experience suggests that clients often find it difficult to write comprehensive RFPs for professional Web development. The reasons for this are varied. The commercialization of the Internet is still in its infancy and many clients are still educating themselves on the range of opportunities available to them. Meaningful RFPs require interdisciplinary expertise and input from professionals with business, design and technology backgrounds.

### 1. Business structure

Good Internet strategies begin with an understanding of the client's business. The first section of the RFP should be a few paragraphs describing your business. Providing potential vendors with corporate literature and/or a press kit may also be helpful. Among the questions which should be answered are:

- In what industry is the business? What is the unique competitive positioning of the company?
- Who are the company's major competitors?
- What has been the company's performance over time (growth rate, stock performance, etc.)?
- Who are key vendors/suppliers? How many total? (important for business-to-business solutions)
- How big is the company (revenues and employees)? What is the geographic span of the company?
- What is the profile of the company's customers?
- What is the company's growth strategy?

### 2. Current internet experience

The client should discuss its current involvement with the Internet. If no Internet presence exists, then the client should describe their level of familiarity with the Internet and/or the level of commitment from senior management. If a site is up, then the client should focus on what they find missing from the existing site.

Questions to be answered for this section include:

- Does the company have an existing Internet site?
- If so, when was it originally launched and what iteration does it represent?
- Who designed the existing site and who maintains it?
- What currently works with the site?
- What does management find lacking in the existing presence?

### 3. On-line goals and objectives

The company's online objectives should drive the web site's content, design, functionality and technology. It is critical that a company and each of its business units or divisions understand what they are trying to accomplish through the Internet. At a minimum, the objective of a web site might be to simply have a marketing presence based largely on existing corporate literature. More sophisticated solutions might incorporate interactive customer service models focused on cost-reduction or e-commerce storefronts aimed at increasing revenues. In considering Internet objectives, a company needs to keep in mind the intended audience and the online benefits to that audience. The overall corporate Internet objectives and rationale should be articulated in one or two paragraphs.

Explain which of the following best represent the type of site desired: marketing presence, customer service, static information delivery, dynamic information delivery, e-commerce, aggregate vendor, supply-chain management, community-building, or other? (note: more than one may apply).

- Does a competitor currently provide the Internet experience the company seeks?
- What will the site do more efficiently than the processes currently in place?

#### 4. Site content and Design requirements

Content and creative design represent two of the most critical elements of front-end solutions and, by extension, online branding. The combination of content, layout, navigational logic and creative design make up the user interface, which is a critical driver of the user experience. The user interface determines how information is presented to a visitor to the web site so they can most quickly and easily access the information.

- Who are the main constituencies of the site?
- What are the key messages that need to be delivered to those constituencies?
- Is the site envisioned to be more information or graphic-oriented?
- Is the delivery of the proposed site's key messages more analogous to a book, a magazine, or a television commercial?
- How might different visitors navigate the site? In what order will they want to visit the site's information?
- Approximately how many pages of content would the site contain?
- Does the content need to be developed and if so are there resources available?
- What percent of the content could/should be outsourced?
- Is there an internal style guide for content or design?
- Is the company aware of sites that approximate the desired information or creative design?
- Is there an archive of photos or other art that might be used for the site?
- If appropriate, would the company commission original illustration or photography?

#### 5. How the site would function

Since the starting point of an engagement should be a documentation phase to determine the appropriate functionality for a given strategic objective, it is not likely that a client will already know the range of functionality desired. However, the company's past experience with the Internet or exploration of competitors' sites may provide an early indication of what functionality will likely be considered. The functionality section of an RFP may be a paragraph describing sites which illustrate useful functionality in the client's eyes. A table with a listing of all potential functionality with an indication of whether that functionality is implemented, planned, or just under consideration may also be helpful. The key to understanding the required functionality is to focus on the end-user or customer's perspective - what would truly be useful for them that is not currently available.

- Which existing sites best approximate the desired functionality?
- Will the site involve database development or integration?
- To that end, does the client want/need the site to be able to deliver multiple and dynamic end-user experiences?
- Have any of the following been implemented, planned, or considered: chat, online calendar/project management, multimedia, resume submission, automated e-mail replies, other?
- If the site is e-commerce in orientation, does the final solution anticipate full transaction capabilities including catalog, payment, fulfillment, verification and order tracking?

#### 6. Back end

Clients with an IT department or knowledgeable web master may be able to provide an additional level of useful detail. Technical specifications begin to speak to the back-end solution both from an infrastructure (e.g. hosting environment) and programming point of view.

- Has the corporate domain name been registered?
- Is the hosting currently done in-house or outsourced?
- What are the usage statistics (if available) and anticipated growth?

- Are there significant security concerns? What are the security needs of the site, both physical and electronic?
- What is the existing development platform (e.g. Windows NT with ASP, UNIX, etc.)?
- Are there legacy systems that need to be considered? What are the existing databases in place (e.g. Oracle 8)?
- What browsers are visitors likely to use? Has a targeted browser version been determined?
- In addition to the browsers, what are the end-user system targets (e.g. bandwidth, screen resolution, Mac or PC)?
- If multimedia capabilities are anticipated, which development tools might be used (e.g. Shockwave, Flash, or Real Audio)?
- Which of the following might be used (if known): HTML, DHTML, Java, CGI? For what purpose?

### **7. How will maintenance be achieved**

The implementation component of the RFP should speak to timelines, budgets and available resources. In addition, larger issues of business process impact or change management should also be highlighted.

- What are the timing, budget and resource constraints for this project?
- How will the project be managed (e.g. will there be a dedicated project manager on the part of both the client and the vendor)?
- What will define success?
- What are the key measures for success?
- Is there an internal and external marketing plan for the site?
- What tracking mechanisms are currently in place?
- Does a Web Director and/or Web Technician exist within the organization?
- What resources or planned resources will be available to implement and maintain the site?
- What would be desirable in the next generation (i.e after this project) of development?