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A guide to writing and evaluating qualitative research proposals

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There are several thousand companies that offer qualitative research services worldwide and the research manager's job is to make judicious selections among them. Soliciting and evaluating research proposals normally is the most thoughtful and objective way to determine who is best qualified to complete an assignment.

The selection of a research company ideally should take place after the research manager and/or others in the marketing, planning or consumer insights groups have personally interviewed the people who will be doing the work, in addition to company principals. Agency presentation materials as well as any articles, sample reports, company policy statements etc., turned in by the researchers should be thoroughly reviewed so that the manager can become familiar with the basic orientation, values and skills of the prospective supplier and determine how well they match the needs of the sponsoring client.

References and credentials supplied by qualitative research consultants should be checked and verified. Recognizing that other research and marketing executives lead busy and overscheduled lives, no unfair negative inferences should be made because a reference is slow in responding to an information request.

Proposals submitted by at least two companies or moderators should be compared before a project is assigned. It is generally unfair and unprofessional, however, to solicit proposals from agencies that are unlikely to be assigned the project or to use a competitor's proposal to manipulate a favored supplier into changing their fees or terms.

Proposals

Research managers should prepare a detailed "request for quotation" or "request for proposal" (RFQ, RFP) that follows their project brief. Prospective research partners should respond with proposals in writing within a reasonable amount of time - at least three to five days should be allowed. Rushing the quotation process can be risky. Verbal or ballpark estimates of project costs that are based upon just a verbal outline of study requirements can be highly vulnerable to unexpected modifications as project specifications become clarified.

Proposals should demonstrate that the moderator understands the conceptual and marketing issues that underlie a project. They should also establish clear plans for project execution. Listed below are the details which may be expected in proposals:

- A review of project objectives which demonstrates that the conceptual, methodological and marketing issues involved are clearly understood by the researcher.
- A project implementation plan, specifying all research activities; for example, the number of focus groups or site visits, where they will be conducted, how long each is expected to take, how participants will be recruited, and what the screening requirements will include.
- The names and qualifications of company principals and associates who will be handling major project responsibilities such as moderation, report writing, etc.
- The names and locations of other companies and subcontractors that will be handling major fieldwork responsibilities.
- The project fee and a clear explanation of cost factors. In this area, some research managers expect a simple sum of project fees while others expect a detailed cost accounting of the entire expected budget. The estimate of fees normally has an applicable life span of three months unless the consultant specifies another length of time. Costs may have to be revised if the project scheduling moves beyond this point.
- Description of the deliverables - that is, the form and length of topline, summaries, full reports, presentations, etc. If the contracting client wishes to have the findings delivered in a particular form, such a PowerPoint presentation, this should be clarified in the proposal.
- Schedule for project execution.
- Expectations for client tasks, accountability and responsibilities.
- Expected terms of payment. The research manager should expect that currency issues (if any), due dates, late fees, etc., should be discussed in detail.
- Clear guidelines for what could trigger added or unanticipated costs. In particular, the research manager should expect that changes in project execution details between the submission of the proposal and the start of the project, including changes or further precision in respondent specifications, extensions of the number or length of interviews, imposition of respondent quotas, and similar alterations will generate revised charges.
- If a confidentiality agreement has not yet been signed by the vendor, the proposal should contain assurance of confidentiality.

As noted earlier, contingency limits around cost estimates equal to +/- 5 or 10 percent should be expected and accounted in the internal budget.

If the research manager is unfamiliar with the research companies' policies about contingencies, these should be reviewed - particularly if there is some uncertainty and indeterminacy in the execution details. For example, handling of weather emergencies should be discussed if the project is headed to a wintry or stormy climate; responsibility for recruitment failures should be discussed in the case of rare, low-incidence or sensitive targeted respondents.

Is the proposal a contract? This matter should be reviewed with legal counsel. However, for the most part, the proposal outlines a set of mutually accepted responsibilities and terms for a business engagement and should be treated as a binding agreement.

Unethical proposal practices

Research managers should understand that some practices in relation to proposals constitute a breach of professionalism, courtesy and ethics. Examples of common faults include:

- Expecting the research company to provide value-added consulting services prior to winning the assignment. These may include project design, developing research instruments and special exercises and providing customized local market information. The research company may wish to supply some of these services to place themselves in a better competitive position; however, it is wrong to make this an expectation.
- Disclosing details of one research company's proposal to another, in order to place the second in a better competitive position. The research company's approach, company information and pricing structure should be treated as proprietary and confidential.
- Seeking "comparison bids" without charge. Research managers should not use another company as a lever or check on a regular supplier.

Evaluating proposals

Once several proposals have been submitted, the research manager typically must review them with senior research, brand and marketing management. The process of vendor selection can sometimes become derailed by individual egos and political dynamics which are harmful to successful study execution and should be avoided.

The primary criteria that should be applied in the selection process are the fit between the project's substantive requirements and the consultant's personal qualities - including their level of enthusiasm, poise and professionalism - as well as the skills and professional capabilities offered by the research company.

Cost should be a secondary consideration and only applied if two or more research companies are deemed equivalent in all other respects - which is rarely the case. If costs are to be compared, the research manager should be certain that the proposals offered are equivalent in all respects, particularly in terms of specifications and possible hidden costs not apparent in the quotation. Cost alone should not stop a research manager from assigning a study to a desirable agency. If budgetary requirements present limitations, the manager should consider adjusting project specifications and assumptions - provided, of course, that these do not imperil research quality.