

## ARE CLIENTS BECOMING CONSULTANT-FRIENDLY?

Those in the AE industry long enough can remember when going after a project was tantamount to a guessing game. Guess what the client really wants. Guess who is competing against you. Guess what the evaluation criteria will be; and if you were a sub, even guessing who ended up with the job, until it was published much later on. All that has changed for the better, both on a macro level, and now on a micro level. Not only are the giant government clients like state DOT's eager to let you know everything about the jobs that are out there; the process to go after them, and what the results are, but local community boards are becoming more consultant-friendly as well. The common thread is woven by the world-wide-web.

First, consider what the giant clients have done with the selection process. It's gone from a guessing game to a numbers game. Firms send in EOI's (Expressions Of Interest) and proposals electronically, following criteria found on the client's web site. Their proposals are evaluated by a computer program; selection is made and posted back on the web site. No humans are involved. You can even get an electronic debriefing, and view your competition.

Proponents say that it eliminates favoritism by doing away with the human element for this part of the process. Some large firms are even replicating the large state programs in-house, in an attempt to put together a combination of firms that will get the highest score by the computer beforehand, so that if they are short-listed, they can follow up by presenting to real people. It's not always who has the best team, but who has the team that can win.

Since information is now the currency of the technology revolution, public access to the selection process is at a heightened level. Consider these comments from two client leaders; one a large state housing authority that posts forecasts of all work two years out on its web site, and the other a small community college, who began posting all upcoming work on their web site after advertising it locally in the print media in the past.

*Client, Housing Authority: Director, Office of Opportunity Programs*

"Within the last few years the selection process has become more objective. We invite not only newer firms, but smaller firms, and we offer them 'term consulting' contracts. Previously, the selection process only looked at larger firms who were recycled from project to project."

Typically, selection committees looking at qualifications feel that a firm's experience base is the most critical, preferably with them, but also the extent that the firm has successfully run positive minority and WBE utilization programs.

"Of our term consultants, 75% are MBE/WBE's. It is now the fastest growing area, with more women involved than ever before. We prefer firms that have direct experience in the projects we are executing. However, if members of their staff have that experience, the firm will also be considered. Small firms often struggle to get an opportunity to talk to each one of our chiefs, or directors of program areas. We now get all the directors together at one time, to sit down and review their resumes. While small firms may not have the ability to hire marketing people, they take a back seat to the larger firms who do, so we engage consulting teams to come in and speak to these small firms in a one-day session, to teach the principals how to market strategically. We see those firms who participated now being awarded contracts."

*Client, Community College: Administrative Director of Business Operations*

"Our RFP process on our web site is working out well for us. We advertise in the local papers, but direct them to the web site for all the details and evaluation criteria. The objective is to create fairness and public access to our process. We want to make sure that we have the most open and publicly available solicitation."

One example of the value of the web RFP is the result of a solicitation for a modular structure on campus. "Our web site laid out a suggested floor plan with suggested room sizes, and specified that we want alternatives on the facing. We asked for a price per square foot, per month, per year, over a 10-year period. Give us an option on an extension, take it away at the end, and price it all out."

The last modular building they advertised using this system produced an out-of-the-box solution. The design firm came in with a proposal for a boomerang-shaped building, instead of a standard modular rectangle. That design feature was the heaviest factor in the client's determination to award them the bid. The process may be electronic, but noone said to hold the creativity.