

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS



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The Business RFP

How to Throw Your Hat in the Ring

For many a small business, responding to an RFP (Request for Proposal) is a daunting task. In fact, many small business owners won't even consider throwing their hat in the ring because the prospect of creating a formal proposal is so overwhelming. After all, most entrepreneurs aren't proposal writers, and hiring someone who is can be expensive. On the other hand, there are others who treat an RFP as something you cut and paste together from existing documents on your computer. Gwyneth Dwyer, Director of Writing Services for Larsen, a design, marketing, interactive, and branding firm with offices in Minneapolis and San Francisco, believes to do so is a mistake. "An RFP is a key step in engaging an outside marketing partner," she explains in an article at MarketingProfs. "Don't underestimate its importance."

Companies put out RFP's when they need a project to be completed by a contractor or outside source. The RFP is a formal document outlining the project, the format with which companies should respond, how the proposals will be reviewed, deadlines, and contact information. A consistent format is often requested in order to make it easier for them to compare responses. Outside companies respond to the RFP by writing a proposal (in essence, a bid) explaining how they can best meet the company's expressed needs. Some RFP's (those put out by very large corporations or government) are extremely comprehensive and take significant preparation. These may be out of reach for a small business unaccustomed to submitting proposals, however, many medium-sized and smaller companies put out RFP's that are less complex, and are achievable for small or home-based businesses.

With that in mind, here's some advice for writing an effective RFP:

Follow the format requested in the RFP. Companies ask for information in a specific format for a reason – most often so that they can compare responses from one company to another. You may think you have a brilliant and creative way of presenting the information, but if you don't follow the instructions you may put yourself out of the running. I've heard of proposals being

rejected for missing postal codes or the package being submitted in a spiral bound format when a staple in the corner was requested. Follow the deadlines as well. Most companies won't accept a late RFP.



Create a document that represents you and your company well. Your RFP is your first impression, your best foot forward. Your proposal should be properly structured and well written, with clearly established sections and headlines. Reviewers should be able to quickly scan the document and find the sections they are looking for. While there may be some variances (and you need to follow the requested format closely), a typical RFP contains the following elements:

- Executive summary - summary of the entire proposal
- Statement of need - why project is necessary
- Project description - how project will be implemented and evaluated
- Organization information – history, structure, and organization of your company
- Project schedule – when and how you will deliver on the project
- Budget – your proposed budget for the project
- Conclusion – a summary of why you are the best company to deliver on the project

Another part of representing yourself well is ensuring the document is free of errors. Nothing says “incompetent” like typos, sloppy formatting, grammar mistakes or an incomplete proposal. Most RFP's come with a checklist so that you can review your document at the end to ensure nothing has been missed. If it doesn't, create one yourself. Get someone to proofread the proposal – especially if writing isn't your strong suit – to ensure it is complete, error free, neat, and easy to read.

Make sure the project and the company is a good fit with yours. "Send your RFP only to those organizations that have a reasonable chance of doing business with you," advises Dwyer. "Doing so is not merely courteous and professional, it's also efficient." Compare it to sending out a generic resume to every business in your town, or sending a customized one to a few specific companies who really need the skills you have to offer. RFP's are a lot of work, and you don't want to waste your time, or the time of the people reviewing submissions. Choose carefully. Research the company and the project. Are they a good match for your company ethically? Does their work style and personality fit with yours (i.e. formal versus casual)? Does the project fit within the scope of your personal and business experience and expertise? Can you afford what will be required for cash-flow? Do you have enough staff, or are you able to hire what you need? These are all important aspects to consider BEFORE you do the work of writing the RFP.

There are lots of examples of RFPs on the internet. A proposal can be two pages or as big as a book – it all depends on what the company putting it out is looking for. It's like any other skill - the more you do it, the better you'll get at it. In the end, your first RFP can be the foundation for ones to come. Once you've gathered the information, use it to shape and customize future proposals. You may not enjoy the process of creating an RFP, but if you think of it as a

springboard for new business and growing your company, your time will seem well spent.

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Flexible Job Descriptions

Making the Most of Your Staff Resources

Jim is an excellent welder, but also has skills in mechanics and carpentry. Susan is a meticulous bookkeeper but is also an exceptional proofreader. Andrew is your best sales rep but he loves to design your marketing materials and has a flair for interior design. I am currently the General Manager of a non-profit organization, but my work history includes jobs in catering, graphic design and marketing, training, HR and writing, plus skills I've gained in my volunteer work. All this to say that while most of us have jobs in areas where we've been trained and have developed specific skills and proficiencies, all of us have colourful backgrounds and a variety of skills (many of them hidden or undiscovered) that may or may not be used in our current jobs. As a small business owner, if you're not taking advantage of the many things your staff can contribute to your business, you're missing out!

One of the ways to do this is to create an atmosphere where job descriptions are flexible, and can be adapted to take advantage of the skills within your staff. Many of us have grown up with job descriptions that are rigid and specific. The list of job tasks and expectations is generally narrow and business owners didn't stray too far from them. The old-school way of thinking is that keeping employees focused on a specific track will make them more efficient. We are learning now that the opposite is true.

With baby boomers being on the back end of the employee lifecycle, and Gen Y, X and Millennials entering the workforce, we need to look at jobs differently. The generations behind boomers are more interested in variety and job satisfaction. They want to use all their skills – not just a narrow representation of them. And as a small business owner, it is to your advantage to use the skills available to you within your workforce.

Of course you need to start somewhere – and creating a job description for a specific position should be your starting point. But when you hire, listen for those hidden skills. Can you build them into the job? Talk to your current employees and find out what else they have done and where they might be able to use their skills help you grow your business. As a small business owner, you must wear many hats – be good at many things. Think of your staff the same way. Allow them to wear more than one hat and you may be surprised at how much colour and depth they add to your business.

So Susan's main task is keeping the books, and





she's good at it, but those analytical and organizational skills also transfer into other areas. She never misses a typo and is a grammar aficionado, so why not have her be responsible for proofreading all your marketing materials, proposals, and sales letters? And while you're at it, after you learn how much she loves to entertain, why not give her the opportunity to plan your next staff party or put her in charge of customer appreciation events?

Sometimes a flexible job description requires the opposite – paring down a job that has grown too large. I recently had to do this with one of my staff when I realized she had taken on too many tasks outside her primary job. She was constantly volunteering to help out co-workers in other areas; areas that she was in fact very good at. But in the end it fractured her too much and her main job tasks began to suffer. So we sat down and reviewed her job description, removing some of the things she had taken on and refocusing her on the tasks required. She was relieved to be able to let those things go without disappointing anyone and I assigned them to a newer employee who was eager to show her skills in those areas.

Creating flexible job descriptions doesn't mean everyone does whatever they want. The business tasks still need to be done and will be the core of each employee's job description, but being open to allowing them to use their skills to excel in more than one area will benefit your business, and give them a work experience that creates higher level of job satisfaction and company loyalty.

Reviewing job descriptions should occur at minimum, annually, and preferably every six months. As you watch your business grow and see demands for new skills; as you get to know your staff better and hire new employees, keep in mind the areas where you can shift, add, remove, duplicate, delegate, share, and create job tasks in existing job descriptions, and start a wish list for the next new position for which you'll need to hire. A flexible workplace ranks among the top indicators for job satisfaction among incoming Gen X, Y and Millennials. How fantastic it is that a flexible workplace is good for your business too!

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Listening to Your Heart

Following the Compass Inside

It's happened to all of us at one time or another – that nagging feeling inside that something is just not quite right. We may not know exactly what it is that's not working, but we know it's something. Whether you stop to listen to that inner nagging voice may make the difference between finding the path you ought to be on, or staying on the wrong one. All of us have

intuition, only some people have learned how to “tune in” to their inner compass more effectively than others, but it’s a skill we would all do well to improve. Your inner compass tells you when you need to pay attention to something you may not consciously be aware of. It often lets you know when it’s time for change, or when you’re heading down a destructive path. If you learn to heed its prompting in your business, you may avoid unnecessary pain and move towards success much more quickly.

Divine Discontent

That inner nagging has been referred to as “divine discontent”. You may feel uneasy or restless for reasons you can’t quite put your finger on. You aren’t happy or satisfied with the way things are going but you don’t know why. You feel the need for a change but may not know where or how. Your stress level increases even though your circumstances remain the same. You find yourself daydreaming, and not sleeping well. You may be irritated by small things that don’t really matter, and not care about the things that do. If you are experiencing some of these things, you may be in the process of divine discontent.

Master motivator, Brian Tracey, said “Unhappiness is to your life as pain is to your body. It is sent as a messenger to tell you that what you’re doing is wrong for you.” He goes on to say that divine discontent is actually a very good thing, because it always precedes a positive life change. Satisfaction rarely leads to change, but discontent most often does. If you are feeling restless, discontent, or uneasy, don’t ignore it. Ask yourself if there are areas in your life and in your business that need to change. If you take the time to really reflect on what you’re feeling, the answers will come to you, and you’ll know what path you’re being prodded to take.



Personal Purpose

Many times divine discontent comes as a result of not being true to your personal purpose. If the direction you are going with your business conflicts with your values, principles, or simply the purposes you have set out for your life, you will feel discontent. You will feel that same discontent if you have strayed too far from a purpose you identified at some point in your life or in your business. The incongruence eventually turns into stress and affects you physically and emotionally. If you’ve never really determined your personal purpose, you may be feeling restless because of it. We all need to have a sense of purpose for the things we do in life. If you’ve never taken the time to define what your purpose in life is, make it a point to do so in the next two months. Personal purpose not only helps you to line up all the aspects of your life, but it also propels you more quickly towards your goals.

Uncommon Commitment

Sometimes discontent shows itself in a lack of commitment. It may be commitment to your customers, your staff, or your product or service. If you’re experiencing apathy about your daily routine, ask yourself if you’re committed to the right things. It’s hard to be committed to

something you don't really believe in, even if you once did! Commitment to what you're doing is a sure sign that you're on the right track. If your commitment is waning, it may be a warning sign.

Activating Action

If you think you've been experiencing divine discontent, here are some steps you might take to help you determine which direction to take:

1. Set aside a specific time when you will think about these things. It must be away from the office, your family, and your regular activities. Ideally, it should be away from other people. If you enjoy keeping a journal, use it as a way to explore what's going on. If not, simply jot down some of the areas where you feel discontent, and ask yourself if there is a need for change that corresponds to those areas.
2. ***If you've never written a personal mission statement, consider taking the time to do so.*** Spend some time looking at what's really important to you, what you value, what you want to accomplish in life, what you hope others will say about you when you're gone, and then work backwards to develop a personal purpose wherein everything you do – at work or at home – lines up with that purpose. It's similar to the way you measure everything in your business against your strategic plan to let you know whether you're on track.
3. ***Look at your commitment.*** Are there things you're struggling to stay committed to? Ask yourself why. Are they no longer important to you? Are they not right for you at this moment in time? Are there changes that need to be made in order for your commitment level to rise a few notches?

Your inner compass will rarely lead you astray. The question is, are you willing to tune in to what it's saying and make the changes it's suggesting? Ignoring its prompting will leave you frustrated, irritable, and discontent. Paying attention will ensure you remain on the right path for you, and your business.

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Lead Generation

What You Need to Know Now

According to successful online marketer and business coach, Karen Sielski, "marketing is on the cusp of a seismic change, and "NEW marketing" strategies like social networking and online lead generation are necessary if you are to prosper in the new world." If you read the article in the September edition of Small Business Success, you're probably already thinking about how this new world of social networking is going to affect many aspects of your business. Here's another one to consider – the generation of leads. The old-world "funnel" approach – where many leads put into the hopper eventually come out the bottom as a few qualified leads - simply doesn't work anymore. First, people don't buy in a linear way anymore. There are dozens of things that factor into a buying decision and they will be coming from many different sources. Second, people don't trust advertising. What they do trust is referrals and recommendations from peers, friends, and other product users. Finally, there is a vast increase in the number of choices consumers have when considering making purchases.

In addition, the number of information sources available for getting product information is staggering. With things changing so quickly, and so many options out there, how can you decide which lead generation strategy is right for you and your business? Here are seven critical factors when evaluating lead generation ideas.

1. How much will it cost? For many small businesses, cost is the primary consideration in any lead generation activity. And indeed, it is an important factor. But cost must be considered as only one factor. It's important to ensure your cash flow can handle the investment, but there is more to consider.
2. How much time will it take? For most small business owners, time truly does equal money. Even among the various free lead strategies, the time commitments can vary and should be considered when comparing strategies. Does the strategy require your time, or can you delegate the task to someone else? Is the time it takes to create and deliver the strategy worth the time it takes you away from other aspects of your business?
3. How many do you need? Sielski asks, "Do you need 100 leads a day or 100 leads a month? The answer to this question will impact your choice of lead generation strategy." Every business is different. An exercise in crunching down the numbers to determine the amount of sales you need per month, and the number of leads required to make those sales is valuable, and worth the time. The more targeted you can be about the quantity of leads you require, the more effective your efforts will be. You may find you are seriously under (or over) working your leads strategy.
4. How quickly do you need results? Some strategies can generate results almost instantly. Others take time to generate a consistent lead generation flow. You not only have to consider how many leads you need but also how quickly you need them.

5. Are you looking in the right places? A new study published in McKinsey Quarterly (the online business journal of McKinsey and Company; www.mckinseyquarterly.com) reports that two-thirds of the touch points in a buyer's evaluations process are now consumer-driven; things such as user-generated reviews, word of mouth, and in-store interactions. Only one-third of the touch points are still company-driven. This is a significant shift in buyer-mentality, and your lead generation strategies should take this into account. According to the newest consumer metrics, people will buy from you more often because they've heard about you



6. **Can you "double dip" on your efforts?** Think about whether you can leverage the work you do in lead generation in various ways. For example, if you write an industry-related article in your local newspaper, can you also use some of that same information in an online blog, or to develop a new print piece? Or can you link your Facebook members or Twitter followers to the article? Finding creative ways to use what you've already done in one lead generation arena and applying them to another is efficient, effective, and saves time and money.

7. Can you keep track of the results? According to Sielski, “In order to evaluate your lead generation methods, it is essential to track how leads are generated and any associated costs.” When considering a lead generation strategy, ask yourself if the results can be measured. If the success and costs cannot be tracked, how will you know whether they are being effective?

The science and philosophy behind lead generation is changing rapidly, so before you launch out with an old-fashioned approach, consider these factors and put your time, money and energy into a strategy that will bring you the best results that will be most valuable for your business.

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How to Generate Original Creative Ideas

Using Random Word Generation to Boost Creativity

While researching creativity exercises for a strategic planning session our organization is embarking on, I came across an interesting technique called Random Word Stimulation (RWS) in an article by Milo Bono. RWS is a powerful technique that provides a practical method of accessing your subconscious mind and utilizing it to generate fresh new original ideas. According to Bono, regular practice causes the brain to expand its neural network to accommodate a more free-form style of thinking, which strengthens the connection to the subconscious mind and allows for enhanced creativity and critical thinking skills. Bono says that in using this simple technique, you can find new ways to solve personal or business problems, create new inventions, improve existing products and services, explore your own feelings and your relationships with others, and - in the larger sense - to discover new ways of thinking about absolutely anything that interests you. If you're looking for a way to add some spice to a planning meeting, or need a new way to brainstorm around a current problem or business challenge, try this technique and see whether you can expand those neural networks and generate fresh ideas.

Before you begin, you will need a printed dictionary – you know, the old-fashioned book kind, not the one on your computer. You will also need a way to take notes – white board or flip chart are best so people can watch the process unfold. Here are the five steps.

Step 1: Define the purpose

Write down exactly what it is you want to generate new ideas about. Bono suggests trying to capture the true essence of what you're looking for in as few words as possible, but also as specific as possible. Some ideas?

1. **Solve a problem** – Clearly state the problem you need to solve.
2. **Generate Ideas** - State what the new ideas are about – creating a new product line? Rebranding an existing product? Creating a customer service strategy?
3. **Ask a Question** – Bono says “It’s amazing how answers can present themselves with the help of some random stimulation - answers that come from the same mind that asked the question!”

Step 2: Gather the stimuli

Give the dictionary to one of your staff. Have them open it to any page and place their finger without looking, to a spot on the page. Have them tell you the word that is closest to their finger, and write it on the board. This technique works best when there is no obvious relationship between the word and your subject so no matter how wacky it may seem, use the word that has been chosen. If it is a word that is obscure, have them read the definition so everyone understands the meaning of the word. Repeat this procedure with other staff members to select five or six random words from different pages in the dictionary.

Step 3: Create associations between random words, and what you are trying to accomplish

Your objective is to create associations that connect the meaning of each random word to your subject in some way. Each new association represents the seed of a new idea so the more associations you create - the better your chances of generating useful results. Bono maintains that exposure to the stimulus of random words will immediately trigger associations to experiences buried in your subconscious mind. Many associations and the ideas they generate will not make sense in relation to your subject and may seem illogical, absurd, or completely irrelevant when they first come into mind. "Our minds have been trained to make sense of things." says Bono. "Thoughts that do not make sense trigger a deeply conditioned left-brain response of instantly discarding these thoughts as worthless fantasy. Learning to recognize this conditioned response and bring it under managed control is essential. Catch the moment when you think 'This does not make sense.' and turn it into a question of 'How could this make sense?' It's the effort you make to answer this question that causes the brain to respond." Find any way to connect the words to your subject. Success depends on your willingness to temporarily suspend the urge to discard new ideas and allow yourself the freedom to explore them.



Step 4: Increase your associations

Aristotle first formulated the three laws of association. Apply these laws in as many ways as you can to create your associations. Write down everything that comes into your mind, no matter how silly or irrelevant they may seem at first.

1. **Contiguity:** This law explains how associations work by the stimulation of contact or nearness. A saddle may remind you of a horse, a tree of a forest, a foot of a shoe.
2. **Similarity:** This law explains how similar things produce associations. A cat could remind you of a tiger, a tent may provoke the association with a log cabin, the human eye is similar to a camera.
3. **Contrast:** This law explains how we associate things that contrast one another. A dwarf may trigger associations of a giant, day is a contrast to night, a sad face is a contrast to a happy face etc.

Step 5: Make more connections

After a number of new associations have been generated, you can begin to explore and discover ways to apply your associations to the issue you have identified. Discovering new ways to look at your subject will start to generate new ideas automatically. Just remember that generating new ideas is about quantity rather than quality. The more ideas you generate, the more likely you'll find something valuable. RWS may seem awkward at first, as this new way of random thinking is uncomfortable for many people, but persistence helps to change perceptions, and as you find it working, you'll get more comfortable with it.

So if you're looking for a way to generate some fresh ideas, take a stab at random word stimulation. It could be a lot of fun – especially if you set the stage with an open mind and a positive expectation for success.

Read Bono's complete article on www.innovationtools.com/Articles/ArticleDetails.asp?a=453

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