

IN MY OPINION

Public purchasers should go the Full Monty!

by Michael Asner

Public purchasing is being re-engineered. And, even though purchasing professionals understand the direction of the change, many feel like they simply can't win. Trying to get the job done, they must abide by policies that demand visibly fair, ethical and prudent procurement practice, laws that require fair and open competition, Freedom of Information statutes and a court system that firmly supports these. They must provide information to the supplier community, which in its narrowest sense relates to upcoming procurement opportunities, selection criteria, contract awards, policies and procedures.

I believe that suppliers are entitled to know more about ongoing procurement activities – changes in thinking, major developments, new initiatives, new staff, etc. They are entitled to know how public purchasing operates and its intended direction, to evaluate the effect on their company and the economy as a whole.

Over the last 20 years, the Canadian courts have imposed severe conditions on the purchasing function, establishing and clarifying the duties of the purchasing organization. The originator of the RFP must disclose all the evaluation criteria, treat all bidders fairly and equally, disclose all requirements, avoid misrepresentation and not rely upon undisclosed terms and conditions in determining the winner.

In 1992, one RFP informed suppliers that "... the evaluation team will utilize specific evaluation criteria to rate various requirements for evaluation purposes. Such a rating will be confidential and no totals or scores will be released to any vendor. The proposal will be evaluated on the vendor's background, knowledge, experience and fees and expenses, the project team's knowledge, skill and experience, the ability of the vendor to meet the schedule, the methodology and past relevant experience."

The RFP's message – trust us, we won't tell you how we decide, but it will be fair – did not reassure vendors.

In one of my workshops, *Bullet-Proofing Your RFP*, I suggested a "best practice" – publish a description of the evaluation process, the major evaluation criteria and the scoring weights. One of the participants, a senior purchasing official from a large Crown corporation, indicated that if he did that then he couldn't do what he wanted; he'd have to follow the rules!

Today, many public organizations scramble to make information readily available, especially on their web sites. Many procurement opportunities are announced using an electronic tendering service. Purchasing organizations are frequently trying to engage suppliers as partners, which requires more open communication – the safeguard being an open and competitive marketplace.

Some organizations, such as the government of Nova Scotia, do an excellent job of presenting official information such as policies, laws and procurement regulations. Others, like the state of Arizona, keep suppliers informed of changes in thinking and important events by a web-based newsletter.

See for yourself...

Nova Scotia Public Tenders Notice Service at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/finance/tour>

This site contains all of the major procurement policies and agreements; guides to aid the public in understanding and completing tender documents, as well as a description of the process to promote public-private alliances.

Arizona at <http://sporas.ad.state.az.us>

This site is easy to navigate and contains an informative monthly newsletter, the Arizona Procurement Information Exchange (AZPIX). It is also one of those rare sites that is fun to read. For example, here is my favourite comment from their May newsletter: "Nothing like the end of the fiscal year to bring stress levels and tempers to a boiling point..."

Both Nova Scotia and Arizona have implemented the old adage, "If you can't hide it, feature it." They package their information in a friendly, easy-to-find format. They are interested in communicating with suppliers and benefit from the good will this generates within the supplier community. The provision of abundant information is a good first step in building strong ties and respect. While these two sites are not complex, or expensive, they do set the standard.

In my opinion, it is time to completely abandon old views related to secrecy, power and arbitrariness. Embrace the full Monty: expose it all.

[Michael Asner](#), based in Vancouver, is internationally recognized as a procurement expert. He authors *The RFP Report*, published in Canada and the US, is a regular columnist in *Reseller* magazine, a Sacramento-based publication and authored several books on procurement including *The Request for Proposal Handbook* and *Selling To Government*. He recently launched a new website, www.proposalsthatwin.com.