



Alternative approaches for procuring creative services

There is another way

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Unlike buying a rational product, buying a creative one has judgment and sentiment baked into it. And here, it's the quality of the individual that matters more than their functional role.

Of course, a tender or an RFP (Request For Proposal) is perfectly acceptable for items that can be accurately and consistently compared. Things like paper clips, pens and toilet paper! As well as catering operations, security systems and specialist equipment. But is a tender or an RFP the right way to secure an expert for a creative design project?

A tender rarely delivers the value it sets out to achieve.



1 Don't prescribe before a proper diagnosis

Most Tenders or RFPs ask their shortlisted agencies to prepare creative solutions, using this as a means of differentiating between candidates. This 'see before you buy approach' puts the agency in an impossible position — they are being asked to come up with a solution before properly diagnosing the problem. In most other professions, this is tantamount to malpractice. Inevitably, creative routes that emerge from Tenders or RFPs have no fully formed strategic foundations, hindering their ability to offer fresh insight.

2. Get to the root of the matter

Often with a Tender or RFP, the problem has been identified, but the reason it's come about has not been discussed or quantified. Which means you are missing a key opportunity to explore other solutions. Before answering a brief, any agency worth their salt, will first want to investigate it further themselves. You simply can't solve a problem without first-hand insight of the business, brand, customers and staff. But a Tender or RFP doesn't allow for access to key information and stakeholders.

3 Don't keep agencies at arm's length

The Tender or RFP process keeps participants at arm's length and focuses on presentations rather than conversations. It's not a collaborative process. An agency needs to understand your problems through a deep dive into your company or organisations and the particular area of the project in hand.

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4 A Tender or RFP is ineffective for complex problems

A Tender or RFP submission rarely achieves the right solution for your creative project. **Information gathering and analysis underpins all robust design solutions.** This level of insight can only be acquired through first-hand interactions with the company project team via structured discussions, brainstorming, interviews and workshops.

5 You can't compare apples to avocados

No matter how rigid your Tender or RFP forms are, all the agencies taking part will be trying to stand out. They want to grab the inside track and your attention. They will all define their services in a slightly different way, using different language and different metrics. This makes it very hard to compare agencies' submissions. A Tender or RFP sets out to level the playing field, so that you can compare and contrast different approaches, capabilities and skills. But, in the end, the resulting decision is likely to be based on information or feelings that have nothing to do with the Tender or RFP.



6 Cheapest or best?

A Tender or RFP doesn't always reveal the budgets involved. This is partly to discover which agency is prepared to do the job cheapest. But this totally overlooks the role of value or innovation.

In what other part of your life (business or personal) do you set about hiring an expert based on how cheap they are? You are either searching for best price or best quality. Rarely, if ever, do these two objectives align.

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7. Putting the cart before the horse

Not only are creative agencies being asked to answer questions without having all the access and information they need, they're also being asked to provide thinking, ideas, ways forward and solutions before being paid for them. I can't think of any other industry where this happens. **This is what we do for a living**, so we shouldn't just be giving it away.



8 Regurgitated ideas

Because there's so little time or resource for Tenders or RFPs, and agencies have to create solutions before they've had the opportunity to fully investigate what's at stake, when an agency presents their creative strategy, you should ask yourself: where does this work come from? What insight sparked the concept?

It's worth noting that many professional design firms around the world are against free-pitching, though rightly not against genuine, well considered Tender or RFP, such as those that follow the best practice process outlined in the DBA's 'How to buy design' guides.

Part Two: An alternative approach

There is another way.

And it's simple.

Turn presentations and form filling into conversations. In today's world, it is important to find an agency that fits your business/organisation. An agency you can build a relationship with. One that you can turn to in sickness and in health.

Design agencies already have their track record, client list and areas of expertise to demonstrate their capabilities. Those on the ESPO framework have already been thoroughly vetted across a wide and detailed range of areas, including method statements, costings and charging structures.

At the end of the day, personal chemistry is vital. Defining an outline brief will clarify what you'll be needing from your agency and will narrow the playing field to agencies that have the relevant attributes. Then you can start talking to relevant candidates.

Have conversations (not presentations)

Working from an initial list of 6-10 agencies, visit their websites to understand their capabilities and expertise. Working with your internal team, refine your long list to 2-3 agencies max.

Email and set up conversations with each of the agencies. Make sure you set up the call as an initial discussion about a project you are conducting. Describe the purpose, the project activity and aims, the timescales, the budgets and the process. The clearer you can be, the easier it is to understand the agencies' suitability and willingness to engage with you and your project. Good agencies will ask good questions. So be prepared. If you are not able to answer the question, let them know why.

Meet face to face

Meet the agencies to discuss the project further. Tell them that they are on a shortlist. An open and honest approach will naturally encourage agencies to accentuate their own perceived points of difference. Discuss how the agency's process links to successful results. Ask them to walk you through a case study of a project similar to yours.

Have a discussion with your team to decide which agency is the best fit. Commission the most suitable agency to work alongside you, to get to the heart of the issue at hand.

Conclusion

The Tender / RFP process is flawed, unethical and outdated, and wastes everyone's time and money.

Ditching the Tender /RFP approach and using an alternative method will attract the brightest agencies, as well as providing the best opportunity for the work to meet the project needs and to exceed expectations.

The best agencies produce their best work if their client works alongside them with a shared goal. Collaboration is the key to making success happen.