

COOKING-UP AN ENTICING RESPONSE TO AN RFP

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Have you ever tried to make a soufflé? It's not easy - even when you follow the instructions to the letter. You can invest a lot of time and ingredients (resources); have a dinner party of expectant friends eagerly waiting for dinner (the return on your investment); and still end up dining on frozen pizza.

There may be times when proposing for a contract service with the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency feels like making a soufflé: time consuming and costly with the oven door closed for long periods and little certainty of success. The request for proposal (RFP) process is a substantial commitment on the part of any organization. The competitive process demands a lot of effort on the part of your agency to build an outstanding proposal. The process also has risks - every agency that submits an offer will invest resources in building proposals but not every agency will be awarded a contract.

What does it take to make a delicious soufflé? When your organization prepares to submit a proposal, how can you increase the likelihood of winning an award? First, there is the recipe or the RFP - that is a key starting point. You have the main ingredients of the recipe on hand: great services, effective delivery, and good value. Additional ingredients you have available include: a computer, a mouse, and coffee (optional - but highly recommended). In the RFP process, it is what you do with all of those ingredients that really counts.

Cooking is more than just following instructions and combining ingredients. Understanding how the ingredients interact and the importance that each ingredient has in a recipe makes the difference between a great cook and someone who can reheat a pizza.

To begin, all the ingredients your agency has will make up components of your response to the RFP. Together, all of the components will form your entire meal. A fundamental element of the success of that meal is to set the expectation of the diner. Imagine that members of the Source Selection Committee (SSC) are dining on your RFP. At the beginning of any meal, a menu of courses sets the diner's expectation. Dishes are delivered to the diner in the order described. Organize your responses to the submittal requirements and the RFP in the order they are asked. The members of the SSC will be able to put their full concentration into the content of your responses, rather than wondering why the dessert was offered before the main course.

As you describe what your agency can offer, your proposal will be most effective when it explains how your ingredients will mix with the County environment and result in meeting County goals and objectives. What are the County goals? How is the County planning to reach those goals? Those are important elements of context that you can use to make your strengths relevant to the County plans. This context will guide you in highlighting the components of your program that relate to County objectives.

The County of San Diego plans the use of resources. A major part of the planning process is prioritizing goals. Those priorities are mapped out in the County Strategic Plan and Operational Plans. County programs and budgets are managed using the General Management System. If you haven't used these ingredients in your proposals before, they are easily available at the County of San Diego website at <https://www.sdcounty.ca.gov>.

To understand the County priorities and plans, go to the Chief Administrative Office (CAO) page of the website. From the main webpage, select "County Departments" from the Quick Links column. Next, select "Chief Administrative Office" from the County Departments list. This will bring you to the CAO webpage at <http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/cao/>. There are three links on the CAO webpage that you can use when drafting your proposals: General Management System, San Diego County Strategic Plan, and Operational Plans.

San Diego County Strategic Plan: This is the plan for the whole dinner party. It describes why the dinner party is being planned, what we want our guests to have at the dinner party, the event theme, the guest list, and the decoration.

Operational Plans: This is what each section of the County will bring to the dinner party to create the whole vision outlined in the Strategic Plan. The Operational Plan details the actions the County needs to take to have a dinner party as planned.

General Management System: This is how the County will manage the development and execution of the dinner party, evaluate the success of the dinner party, and incorporate lessons learned in order to improve future dinner parties. This is the County's corporate culture.

When you look at the Strategic Plan, you will notice that the County has focused on three specific Strategic Initiatives: Kids, The Environment, and Safe and Livable Communities. Within each Strategic Initiative, there are more specific components that describe what the achievement of those initiatives will look like. When you are preparing to respond to a request for proposal, think about how the service being requested will fit within the three Strategic Initiatives.

Additionally, the Strategic Plan outlines Required Disciplines. These are the administrative structures the County will look for and have been identified as necessary administrative components of a successful program. You may even choose to reference these disciplines when describing your internal structures – translate what you do into the language the County is using.

The Operational Plans are separated by groups and then more specifically by the Divisions within the group. The Operational Plan for HHSA details the activities that each Region or Division will perform to work toward the big picture goals described in the Strategic Plan. You might be tempted to skip the Strategic Plan and only look at the HHSA Operational Plan. The advantage to reviewing both is that you may be able to demonstrate how your proposal would connect with the County Strategic Plan beyond HHSA and potentially with another Department. You can add to the impact and power of your connections and program structure by "spicing up" your proposal with an explanation of how your offer would support multiple elements of the County Strategic Plan. That is a meaningful way to explain why your offer is the best value to the County.

In an RFP, you have limited space in which to describe your program, respond to submittal requirements, and make reference to how your program ties to the County Strategic and Operational Plans. The more familiar you are with the County's Strategic and Operational Plans, the easier it will become to link your offer to the County's ultimate goals and desired outcomes. The linkages you can make from the County Strategic and Operational Plans to your RFP response add the desired depth to the RFP and make it memorable, and are best used in limited quantities, like delicate flavors in a great soufflé.

Pairing the ingredients you have within your organization with the recipe provided by the County is important when crafting your response to an RFP. Your use of the County "spices" (Strategic Plan, Operational Plan, and GMS) will highlight the strengths and value of your programs. Use the County internet as a resource to strengthen your proposals and bring out the best in your soufflé – uh, that is, your offer.