

The devil's in the detail

How hard can it be to fill in a pre-qualification questionnaire for a public sector contract? Dean Parker, production manager at Wilde Ones, talks about his recent tendering experiences and begs procurement to talk plain English

By the time you read this, a *Stand Out*-led open session will have taken place at Westminster with Nick de Bois MP, chair of the All Party

Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Events – the session will have discussed with local authorities and Government departments, how to improve the process of procurement in the public sector for the events industry.

Those that know me will be aware that I feel the tender and procurement processes are dismally failing the events industry. Having been invited to sit on the panel, I used the opportunity to highlight just some of these failings by using, as a basis, my experiences with a procurement document received last year.

The document in question was a pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) for an events framework tender, which actually translates as an application to be on an

Knowing that the existing contracts were due to expire – and that they had previously been for a period of four years – I was keen not to miss a window of opportunity, and

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approved supplier list. Rather than use plain English, the PQQ used confusing and alienating jargon. Such a positive start!

contacted the authority prior to December 2012 for news of the tender. I was informed it would be issued later in the year, and true to its word, it was – at the end of May. Just before the commencement of the summer season. The busiest time in the calendar for anybody working in outdoor events.

This begs the question that if the goal of the process is to increase competition, and to attract the maximum number of companies and the best quality applications, why issue it then? Surely during the winter period would be more appropriate.

Perhaps this is down to lack of knowledge about the industry. This is certainly a possibility, as the local authority had “teamed up” with another “transport” organisation in order to produce a joint tender document to create a series of approved supplier lists.

Combining resources might have seemed a marvellous idea on paper. The reality was somewhat different. For included within the paperwork was a document regarding QUENSH (Quality, Environmental, Safety and Health) conditions whilst working for the aforementioned transport organisation.



Dean Parker

While health and safety issues are vitally important in the world of events, what relevance to events is a document more than 60 pages long that references asbestos removal, working on high voltage cables, and safety procedures when walking along railway tracks. It merely wastes the applicants' time, effort, and most importantly money, in filtering out such irrelevancies.

Apparently, issuing a single tender from two disparate organisations made the opportunity "more attractive" to the market. However, one cannot help feel that it was down more to cutting costs than providing a better service. For the document was hardly a paragon of clarity, accuracy or design.

Figures and formats

Both of the documents were presented in Excel spreadsheets. As a trained mathematician, I get a somewhat unhealthy pleasure from looking at spreadsheets, with rows and columns of figures being used for

Rather than spend the time, effort and money to produce a document that was easy to read and understand, one could be forgiven for thinking that the format was actually designed to *deter* applicants from applying. The irony was that in completing the application, I spent hours ensuring that our submission was as clear, attractive and as easy to read as possible.

Attention to detail

A disclaimer featured within the first two paragraphs of the proposal – it offered no warranty to the accuracy or completeness of the information within it. While this may have been intended as a legal failsafe against inadvertent mistakes, you began to feel that it was used in lieu of paying due care and attention to the detail contained within it.

For in one of the tender groupings, the requirement was that companies needed to have a turnover of over £6 million *and* have 25 or more employees.

at college. But this process was so convoluted and frustrating that it had us both screaming at the screen with combined "computer rage".

The documentation merely to upload the tender ran to 23 pages, using unexplained acronyms and inappropriate terminology. It was clear that there had been no attempt to make the process as user friendly as possible. Once again, I was left with the feeling that the process was set up to hinder rather than help.

RSVP

Several months after submission we received an email, telling us we had been successful with our tender, and to read the attached letter. Hurrah! However, on reading the letter we discovered that we *hadn't* actually been successful.

Wilde Ones had attained a score of 65 per cent for our submission. In a stunning failure to ensure clarity and accuracy, the initial brief had been totally contradictory. It initially stated that the pass threshold was 65 per cent. However, it then went on to say that you needed to achieve over 65 per cent to be considered, and that if you scored under 65 per cent you would be rejected. So, if you got exactly 65 per cent, as we did...?

Of course, there's always an appeals process, and several weeks later I received notification from the authority regarding a deadline for such an appeal. The content made little grammatical sense, but I gathered that in order to get feedback regarding the tender, and to potentially appeal the decision, I needed to click a link in the message. This we did, only to be taken to the tendering website where I was informed that an error had occurred.

Undeterred, I phoned the helpdesk, and was told that the link didn't work because the information had been "manually removed". However, they couldn't explain why or by whom. They did, however, furnish us with the name of the person responsible for the tender. I wrote to the said person asking for further information, and awaited a reply. And waited. And waited.

That was in September. It's now January and I'm still waiting for that reply. Not that I really expect to receive one. Prior to this exercise, my opinion of public procurement processes wasn't high, and it certainly hasn't improved. I'm just hoping that the open session at the House of Commons might just be the start of actually changing that opinion, and actively improving things for the future. I live in hope!

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budgeting and accounting purposes. And, I also use spreadsheets very effectively for contact lists and production schedules. But they do have a limited use.

Producing entire documents – as these were – using the font Arial at sizes 8 and 10 point makes new use of the phrase "read the small print". Particularly when one singular cell had over 240 words contained within it. And whilst zooming the scale to view the text is an option, unless you have a monitor the size of a mobile outdoor screen, you cannot view the document in full without constantly scrolling left and right.

It may seem that I'm being picky about the format that the document was presented in, but it was clearly inappropriate for its purpose. I wonder just how many other companies downloaded and read the same information – I'm sure I wasn't the only disgruntled events professional struggling with the same issue.

But once some of the clarification questions were received from potential applicants, this was amended, and the "and" was changed to "or". Now, this is not what could be considered a minor change. The difference is simply huge. Neither was it a typo, as it had been stated in several ways. This is such a fundamental error. It begs belief that it wasn't checked in the first place. It is analogous to quoting a price of £5000.00 and then amending it, saying "so sorry, that decimal point should have actually been one place to the *right!*"

When it came to submitting the documents online, I encountered another long ordeal. As a computer user of more than 25 years, I regard myself as fairly competent in their usage. My work colleague, a recent University graduate, was even more practiced with the foibles of submitting such documentation, as he had recently experienced the procedure