

IS THERE AN RFP IN YOUR FUTURE?

Here's how to show your company is right for the job when a company makes the RFP process mandatory.



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While the request for proposal (RFP) process is common in the professional commercial cleaning industry, it is not as common for carpet cleaning technicians - even those primarily focused on commercial carpet cleaning - to encounter RFPs.

An RFP is a solicitation by an agency, business or building owner/manager interested in purchasing a product or service. If prepared properly, it will indicate exactly what is expected of the vendor's product or service.

With this in hand, vendors, such as carpet cleaning technicians, can then submit bids to supply these products or services (see sidebar).

Unlike government entities, most privately owned and operated facilities still select carpet cleaning companies in more customary ways, contacting two or three carpet cleaning companies and selecting one based on their charges, referrals and references. However, in coming years, technicians should expect to find more companies sending out RFPs for carpet cleaning and accepting carpet cleaning technicians only through an RFP bidding process.

There are several reasons for this, including these:

Cost savings

Instead of taking bids from just two or three carpet cleaning companies, many building owners/managers believe that if they open the door to several technicians to bid on their carpet cleaning needs, there is a greater chance they will get more competitive bids, especially for a large facility or a multilocation business.

Comparing apples with apples

What Is a “Properly Prepared” RFP?

Vendors may not realize that it can be a complicated process to prepare a request for proposal. Some managers simply cut and paste old RFPs and resubmit them, but when it comes to cleaning, that can cause a number of problems.

For instance, some older RFPs related to carpet cleaning might specify two things when it comes to carpet care: %Carpet spotting+on a specific frequency and %carpet cleaning+on another frequency. While the request for carpet spotting might be clear enough, when it comes to carpet cleaning, managers should specify whether they are requesting cleaning the carpets using a bonnet cleaning method, encapsulation or extractors. And if extractors, should they be hot- or cold-water extractors?

And what about interim cleaning? Some older RFPs might not even mention interim cleaning. This all points out that a properly prepared RFP must be clear, specific and up-to-date in order to be effective.

A properly prepared RFP is designed to eliminate incongruities and misunderstandings. The goal is for every company bidding on the carpet cleaning needs of the facility to have the exact same set of specifications. This helps level the playing field and eliminate errors.

The greening of carpet cleaning

As more and more facilities adopt green-cleaning strategies, the RFP process will specify this and stipulate exactly what is meant by green carpet cleaning and what is expected of a green carpet cleaning technician. The RFP may specify, for instance, that only recycling carpet extractors, machines that have earned the Seal of Approval from the Carpet and Rug Institute and/or green-certified cleaning chemicals be used.

Time savings

A properly prepared RFP is designed to save both building owners/managers and vendors a lot of time. By reviewing the RFP, the vendor - in this case, the carpet cleaning technician - will know exactly what is required. If the technician can meet those specifications and provide the products and services required in the RFP, he or she can take the next step in the RFP process. If not, the vendor can move on.

What to Expect

In addition to understanding what an RFP is and why carpet cleaning technicians are likely to encounter more RFPs, technicians now should know what to expect if they decide to submit a carpet cleaning proposal based on an RFP. Typically, there are three key steps in the RFP process:

The RFI

Before the RFP comes the request for information (RFI). This is the time-saving, ~~weeding out~~ process. The goal here is to prequalify vendors so the organization sending out the RFP can identify just those bidders who are capable of delivering exactly the types of services they are requesting and are a potentially good fit with the organization.

For the RFI, expect to address such topics as the length of time your company has been in business, your green carpet cleaning capabilities (if that is what the RFP requires), your company's own green and sustainability program, your ability to service the size and type of facility the organization has, your ability to service multiple locations, insurance issues, staff availability, financial stability* and technician certification.

A meeting with your competitors

The second step involves meeting with the organization administrators sending out the RFP as well as all the carpet cleaning technicians who have passed the RFI. This means that all technicians will

meet at the same time to complete a walk-through of the facility, ask questions and review the scope of services in the RFP.

While these meetings may sound awkward - after all, you are meeting with competitors who are all trying to secure the same account - they usually go smoothly. Astute technicians can even take advantage of these meetings, learning more about their competitors and developing friendships as well as potential working relationships that can benefit both parties at a later date.

The face-to-face

At this point, the bidders have been narrowed down to about three or four companies. Next is a direct conversation with each carpet cleaning company owner. This is the get-to-know-each-other step, and in many ways can be the most important.

The organization requesting the proposal knows your company likely can provide the services it needs at a competitive price; now it wants to know if you and your firm will be a good fit.

Here's a tip that can help you shine in the face-to-face: Suggest ways the company might be able to cut costs and keep its facility cleaner, healthier, safer, etc. A worthy suggestion tells the potential client, not only can you do the job at a competitive price, but you can also take things to the next step, offering ways to help operate the facility in a more effective manner.

The final thing you should know about RFPs is that once a carpet cleaning technician has been selected, the terms of the agreement can be one, two or three years, or even open-ended.

Usually, there is a set period, and this does not necessarily mean the organization is looking to find a new vendor. It might just mean the company is required to send out RFPs, if for no other reason than to ensure that what it is paying is still competitive. In such cases, however, the entire process might start all over for the technician, so be prepared.

**Some RFPs will ask vendors to submit specific financial records at some point in the process. The reason is simple: The organization wants to ensure your company has the financial wherewithal to provide the services it is requesting.*

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