

# COMMUNICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

# Thought

## INVENTING THE RFC

BY ALFRED KAHN

Higher education institutions, organizations and corporations tend to have the same reaction when they discover that Brainworks rarely responds to Requests For Proposals: stunned surprise. “How do you ever get any business?” they ask. “Don’t you want the work?”

In answer to the second question, yes, we want the work. We love doing the work — as long as it’s great work for a great client who wants to refuse the rut and abstain from the average. The work is who we are.

In answer to the first question, Brainworks has been getting business very successfully at the national level for more than two decades now.

### So What’s Our Problem With the RFP?

For one thing, we are in the business of creating effective communications, not creating proposals. We’d rather spend our time on the work. But on a more philosophical level, Brainworks believes that the RFP process is very often simply a preprinted form for impersonal choices, cookie-cutter responses, budget-driven creativity and poor relationships.

We think the process is far more about fear, about covering posteriors, about satisfying legal and fiscal departments, than it is about selecting the best people to put your institution or company into the hearts and minds of prospects. Controlling budgets is one thing — trying to buy creativity, vision and passion the way you would buy toner or manage the motor pool is another. Fairness is critical, expertise is essential, but all too often the RFP process prevents — or at least discourages — institutions from finding or selecting the kind of firm that might help them make a real breakthrough.

Why? Because the very reasons the RFP process exists — corporate-style cost containment and the removal of the personal element from purchasing — work powerfully against passion and inspiration when it comes to, as the purchasing folks would say, “procuring” creative services. There is probably no more ineffective way to hire professional services. Even the purchasing people will admit this — they hold national conferences around the fact that the profession as yet has no handle on how to add value to the procurement of professional services.

One result of all this: client/agency relationships last half as long today as they did 20 years ago. Maybe RFP should stand for Relationship Fouling Process.

“When one person is buying the contents of another person’s brain,” writes Blair Enns, president of Enmark Performance Development and a leading expert on agency/client relationships, “the best way to understand what is being bought is for buyer and seller to spend time in discussion — discussion that allows the seller to demonstrate his or her thinking on his or her own terms, and not the terms dictated by a professional purchaser.

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“In selecting a creative services firm, one is comparing apples to oranges to pomegranates, and the professional procurement process is all about getting the pomegranates into the apple crate. It doesn’t work, yet these inefficient corporate practices are fast making their way into higher education — just as leading corporations are abandoning them as a failed experiment. The buy-sell process, when it comes to professional services, is a necessarily consultative journey. That’s what is required for both parties to make an accurate assessment of one’s ability to bring its intellectual property to bear to help the other. It’s difficult to convey this via a questionnaire.”

Beyond that, the RFP process also almost always asks us to devalue our product — the insight, creativity and brains of the professionals in Brainworks — by providing our thinking on the marketing challenges and needs of the institution or company for free. What a motivation to do our best work!

## So What is the Alternative?

Consider this: Today, markets — your market, all markets — are conversations, not audiences, to paraphrase the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Perseus Publishing, 2000). Doesn’t it make sense, then, that the firm you choose to begin and shape that conversation with your market should be chosen by way of...conversation? Conversation is natural, shared, effective. It answers questions rather than raising them, it has many dimensions. It is the only way to really begin to understand how people think and what they believe.

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Conversation is one of the reasons we have several billion neurons.

So here is Brainworks’ humble suggestion for the entire reimagining of a beloved purchasing process: invent the **Request For Conversation**. List your needs, list your goals, list your hopes, and request a conversation with the firms you believe might be able to help you get there. Don’t request one-sided, barely backgrounded, hastily considered proposals for how it will be done. Request, instead, engaging, multi-sided, wide-ranging, brainstorm-freshened conversations about exciting, effective, affordable NEW ways it could be done. Stop making decisions about strangers; start making decisions with partners.

Don’t base your project on a bunch of forms telling you “who they are and what they plan to do” — have a conversation that also might tell you something about who you are. And what you can do together that’s greater than the sum of its parts. Or its RFPs.

Trust us, if Brainworks ever receives an actual RFC, we’ll respond so fast it will make everyone’s head spin. We’re a creative firm...isn’t that what you want us to do?