

When Not Just *Any* Integrator Will Do

Finding quality security contractors to bid on projects is a challenge for most campuses. Here's how you can ensure bidder participation so you'll select the appropriate partner.



AS A CONSULTING COMPANY THAT OFTEN works with hospitals, schools and universities, our goal is to get as many qualified integrators so the process of bidding on a safety and security project is competitive and the quality level will be roughly comparable, regardless of the vendor selected.

BY ROBERT GROSSMAN

On some projects this may be out of a campus' or our hands. Projects that involve government dollars typically advertise, wait for responses, and evaluate them according to fairly rigid criteria. While hospital, school and university officials as well as their consultants can make some phone calls to ensure selected integrators know a project is advertised so they can respond on their own, the quantity and quality of responses is often left to chance.

Other projects task the consultant or campus official with filling a bid list, ensuring there is sufficient participation. When consultants do

this, we're representing to our campus clients that we will be able to provide them with a minimum of three thorough, competitive bids on the specified project and we'll be able to make a recommendation from those choices.

Further, our recommended bidder will be able to complete the project as a bid, make everyone happy, and earn a reasonable profit. That last item is critical; if the integrator doesn't make a profit on its jobs, it may not be able to stay in business long enough to support the project through the warranty period.

As a result, this bid list is a fairly serious undertaking, and as consultants we spend a lot of time working with integrators to ensure we'll get participation on projects. Since we're asked about this topic so frequently, I thought we'd share some of the steps we take to qualify integrators and ensure competitive bids.



The author (upper left corner) participates in a bid review meeting with an integrator and a client to review plans for an upcoming project.

Be Selective With Those You Put on Your Bid List

Keeping in mind that any integrator placed on a bid list has a chance of winning the job, we don't want to just throw any name in the ring. If an integrator is selected for the job, you are stuck with them, so give as much thought to the bid list as you do to the final selection (see sidebar).

If you are unable to come up with enough prospective bidders to fill your list, asking for recommendations from manufacturers is often an excellent alternative. This works best when you have already selected a manufacturer, but if you haven't settled on one, be sure to compare notes. An integrator that is on top of two manufacturers' lists is generally a good candidate, although it would be rare to find the same company on three lists.

It's important to get manufacturer recommendations in writing, as they can also be referred to as a "get-out-of-jail-free card." If the integrator fails in the execution of your project, the manufacturer will generally step up to the plate and see the job through if your selection of the integrator was based in part on its referral.

Many Security Contractors Should Participate

Once you've filled your bid list, you need to ensure that as many integrators participate as possible. You do this first by providing a brief description of the project, including your best estimate of the time frame involved, and asking them if they'd be willing to bid on the job.

Bidding on a project is very time consuming and costly if done right, and your project may not interest everyone. Don't

take this personally; there are lots of legitimate reasons why an integrator might turn down a bid request, including workload, unfamiliarity with the specified product, or projects that fall outside its comfort zone. Integrators want to bid on jobs they feel they have a good chance of winning. If they don't feel they have the right experience for a project and have a lot of other proposals on which they are working, they will likely pass.

Above all, integrators want a level playing field. If you have written a specification or had a consultant write it for you, you are generally in the clear. This is not the case if you've had help from another

integrator. Many claim to have independent consulting divisions, and if that's the case, have them put their money where their mouth is; tell them if they design the system, they are not eligible to bid on it. Even with that safeguard, other potential bidders may shy away — no one wants their competitor looking at how they bid and price projects. If the project is a design-build, let each integrator come up with its own design; don't play favorites.

Registering All Bidders Ensures Clarity

When a campus' bid has been issued, it is important bidders are asked to register. We've found we have had to turn this from an optional to a mandatory process. We tell them that if they don't register, their bid will not be considered. This is critical because you want to be certain all bidders get the same information. If they don't register, we're not sure the answers are getting to the right people. If a bidder does not register, ask for your package back; you don't want details of your security project circulating any more than necessary.

Once registered, bidders may submit questions in writing. Answers to these questions are sent to all registered bidders throughout the bidding process, as are any changes, clarifications or other pertinent

3 Ways to Evaluate Integrators

1. Personal experience: There are many integrators we have worked with already, and we have an accurate assessment of their capabilities and limitations. We are careful to document the successes and issues on all of our projects, and we maintain database files on all participants. This helps us when deciding who to select on future projects. It also flags issues that may need to be improved.

2. Interviews: As we are always looking to add integrators to our project lists, we spend a lot of time meeting with and interviewing prospective integrators. We learn about their past projects, time in business and overall business philosophy, facilities and available resources. We are careful to find out exactly what type of work they like doing best to determine their comfort zone. Some markets require a high level of specialization, and an integrator unfamiliar with a certain market may not be competitive or may miss things that will come back to haunt them.

3. Reputation: This is perhaps the least reliable way of prequalifying an integrator, partly because it precludes so many. An integrator can work for years to build a good reputation, and one employee can have a bad day and ruin it all. Since you're never likely to hear the integrators' side of the story when they're being knocked, it is often pointless to listen to negative comments unless you really know the source of the remarks. Conversely, if you're hearing great things, make sure a similar project is being discussed.

On a personal note, I've seen as many failures by integrators with stellar reputations as I have successes with integrators who are put down.

documents. As consultants, we answer questions as quickly as we can. We understand that the integrator is putting a lot of time and effort into preparing the bid package, and we want to make the process as painless as possible. By delaying a response, we're concerned the integrator will be up against a deadline and will either throw a high dollar number at the item in question, or decide not to bid because of the uncertainties.

As a side note, some folks lose sight of the goal in the competitive bid process. We feel that if there's one clear winner, we haven't done our job as a consultant. A campus' goal should be to obtain a good number of competitive bids, where all bidders understand the project, provide

pricing that is in the same ballpark, and fill you with confidence that they can get the job done. This allows you to look at other factors — experience with similar projects, service and support capabilities, reputation, and understanding of the products, rather than just price.

Many projects benefit from a prebid meeting where all prospective bidders gather for a project review. This is an opportunity to go over any areas of the specification that might cause confusion, answer any questions, and walk through the job-site to get a feeling as to the physical conditions and work environment. Attendance at the prebid meeting is often mandatory, but this depends on the complexity of the project and the proximity of the bidders.

Make sure a published record of items discussed is sent to all attendees.

Pay particular attention to the questions you get at the meeting and through the RFI process. You'll quickly learn who has read the spec, who understands the requirement, and who is just going through the motions. These are good indicators of the competence of the prospective integrators, but keep from making snap judgments. Remember, the person preparing the bid is rarely the one who installs the system.

At the end of the Q&A, send out a composite list of all questions and answers. This ensures any late registrants are brought up to speed and provides a reminder of the issues that may be tricky or vague in the specification. Ask that all recipients acknowledge they have read, understood and responded to these questions as part of their bid package. The simple act of doing this can dramatically reduce the number (and cost) of change orders if you pick a low bidder that is low because someone in the firm doesn't remember getting your clarifications.

How to Compare Bids

Disqualify bids — Many companies and agencies first look to disqualify bids, and it's a fact of life that not every bid is a competent and clear one. Our recommendation here is that you disqualify bids for real reasons, not just to thin the herd. A real reason is an incurable defect, where the integrator did not provide the proper information or grossly ignored instructions.

For example, a bid for services for the U.S. Postal Service must either be hand delivered or shipped to them via one of the many delivery options it offers. The Postal Service customarily reject bids that ignore this and are sent via another carrier — to them, it's a slap in the face and is justified. On the other hand, I have heard of bids being rejected because a name was misspelled on the package or it showed up a minute late. Again, while this may reflect poorly on the bidder, if it turns out it was the best choice for the project but its mailroom person wasn't on the ball, who are you punishing? Our suggestion is to review those bids as well, and reject them if you don't see enough positive points to offset a minor transgression.

Lowest qualifying bid — Many companies stack-rank the bids they receive, from lowest cost to highest, and look for compliance to the specification. If the lowest bid complies, go no further. We like to give bidders a score, and lowest cost certainly helps their score, but it shouldn't be the only consideration.


Most qualified bid — By adding other elements to the scoring process, you're often able to rank bidders on more than just price. While the scoring criteria can change based on the type of project, we often look at time in business, references, familiarity with specific equipment, similar experience, geographic proximity, presentation quality, and other factors, including price. The goal is to get a three-dimensional picture of the bidder to ensure you're making a well-rounded decision.

Bid equalization — While it's not always permissible, we like to take the best scoring bidders, put their quotes side by side on a spreadsheet, and perform a more apples to apples comparison. This is a better way to get a real cost for the project. For example, if one bidder is offering free shipping and the equipment will be drop-shipped from a manufacturer, you may want to deduct the shipping cost from the other bidders, figuring that you can likely negotiate that item away. If one bidder forgot to include the UPS for a rack, add that cost in, don't disqualify them.

These adjustments may not always affect your ranking of the bidder — after all, it's not appropriate to reward those who make a lot of mistakes — but they will show you why there are variances in the bids and when a low bidder isn't providing comparable services.

Properly Evaluate All Prospective Integrators

On opening day, we tell our clients to rip open the packages, ignore all of the carefully prepared material, and go right to the bottom line price. Why? Because everyone does it anyway. Once that is out of the way, we can focus on a proper bid evaluation. There are a few ways to do this, and the method you use might depend on your internal policies or purchasing requirements.

Hopefully this process will lead you to a clear choice or at least a rich field from which to choose. If not, take a close look at the specification, including any onerous terms you may have proposed, and consider rebidding the package with some of these restrictions modified. If time is an element, a negotiated price is another good option. Whatever you choose, keep in mind that ethics play a greater part in today's society than ever before. If you're the one tasked with selecting the winning bidder, hold off on buying that new sports car until well after the selection process — better safe than sorry! 

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