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Paint Your Way to Success Tips to completing the vendor bidding process like a pro

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One of the most challenging aspects of being a facility manager is ensuring successful results with building paint projects. Our responsibility almost always includes restaurants in multiple markets, often spread across the country. How can a facility manager maintain high-quality results when he or she is the only person managing so many locations?

The answer depends on the facility manager's style and approach. Some facility managers choose to bid projects out to different vendors each year in a rotating fashion, allowing any vendor to submit a bid and always awarding the work to the lowest bidder. Others choose a limited number of primary vendors and stick with them over the course of several years. There are challenges with each approach depending upon how they are executed.

The Lowest Bidder Approach

By taking the "lowest bidder" approach, the facility manager will show savings to the company up-front by continually pitting vendors against each other based only on price. But in the long run, there will be several shortfalls:

- No allegiance: The winning bidder knows they may not have your business next year because your decision was based only on price. They may not be out there representing your best interests.
- Working for bids: Vendors will get tired of being called to bid on projects year after year and not getting any work. The word may also get out that this facility manager is not good to work for.
- Quality issues: The old saying "you get what you pay for" is absolutely true when it comes to building paint projects. There are all kinds of ways vendors can cut corners to make their minimum required profit to stay in business, and the restaurant will suffer.

The Established Vendor Approach

The established vendor knows the brand(s), is familiar with the paint specs and has been doing work for this facility manager for a number of years with little or no on-site follow-up after completion.

Although the facility manager has not seen the completed work, he or she is not receiving any complaints from restaurant operations. The projects are completed on time and within budget, and the vendor relationship appears to be positive.

After a number of years of what the facility manager believes to be stellar results and a great relationship with these vendors, something changes. The next year after the paint projects are completed, the facility manager starts getting calls saying there are quality issues with the completed work. The vendor is the same, the paint specs have not changed: so what has happened?

It is easy to get caught in either of these traps, but we can only blame ourselves. How could these situations have been prevented?

Steps to Ensure Success

Pre-qualify the prospective vendors. Before taking the next step, be sure that all bidders will meet your company's vendor requirements. Let each vendor know when you expect these projects to be completed in the calendar year so they can determine if your expectations match their business model, labor force and available scheduling for those months. Discuss each of these things with each vendor to qualify them properly. Remember, you are not the only customer they have, and the contractor may have already committed much of their time to other projects.

Do not let them over-commit or the project will not be a success for either party. You also will not be wasting their valuable time by asking them to participate in the next step.

Hold on-site meetings prior to releasing the bids. Set up a vendor meeting on-site at a restaurant in each market that will be painted in the current bid cycle. Stagger the time frames with different vendors so you can meet each vendor individually. Arrive on-site at least an hour before your first meeting and go over the site thoroughly, taking notes. When scheduling the on-site meetings, be sure that you communicate clearly that you will require a representative who will actually be executing the task locally, as well as the sales representative, be present at this meeting.

Allow the vendor to share their observations and expectations. Complete a walk-through of the property with each vendor and let them share with you what they see and how they would approach this project, without your input. Let them share with you how they see it from their eyes. This is a great way to see how detailed they will be and the level of quality they are committed to with their work in general.

Genuinely listen to their input and hear what they are saying. Confirm this by writing down notes as they speak. By doing this, you also will earn their respect. Many times a vendor will point out things that I may not have seen myself that should have been addressed either before the building is painted or during the project. Focus more on listening first to them.

Provide each bidder a complete bid package. Include brand-specific and style/year specific building paint specs and renderings of the building interiors and exteriors so the vendors have a good general idea of how the building is to be painted. Be sure to provide everyone with the project timeline so these expectations are in writing. With this approach, if they do not attend the meeting, they will not be able to bid because they will not receive the bid package.

Share your expectations. Now it is your time to talk. Take a few minutes to go back over the notes from their suggestions. Point out what additional things they need to do to meet or exceed your expectations. Be sure to praise them when they are thorough and let them know if their approach, in your opinion, is over-kill based on how your company approaches building paints. Every customer's approach is different, and the vendor is not a mind reader. This way they will know how to provide your restaurants with the quality of work that you expect. Be consistent on your expectations with every vendor and do not change your approach once you have established it.

Consider both the base bid and add-ons. There will always be some buildings that also have rotted wood and damaged walls or trim. Be sure to set the expectations as to whether the vendor is expected to fix these additional issues or just paint as-is. Be sure to first set a not-to-exceed limit for additional repairs and get a primary bid figure with additional repairs.

When additional repairs are required, a facility manager will ask the vendors to bid just the paint work and award the projects based on the base bids only. They will then establish a not-to-exceed limit for any additional repairs during the project. There is a danger with this approach, especially with a new vendor, because costs often will get out of control. Be sure that you also require any additional repairs to be separated on the final invoice with a description and review all invoices before they are paid. Although this approach takes less time initially, you may spend more time later, defending or reassessing your overspent budget.

On the other hand, a primary bid with additional repairs will require the vendor to provide a primary bid for each location and then a short description of any additional repairs required along with the associated cost. That way, the facility manager can decide whether to spend the additional money on each project. This is the safest approach,; however, it will take more time and effort to make these decisions and then communicate them to the winning bidder.

Executing the Projects

After you have reviewed the bids and have made your decision on how the contract(s) will be awarded, the next step should be to execute the projects. Set up a short conference call to allow the vendors who will be doing the work to voice any concerns or receive clarification regarding any of these projects to ensure their success. If necessary, especially for larger numbers of sites, set up a short conference call either weekly or bi-weekly during

the project.

In most cases, once the vendors are set up and ready to proceed, it is sufficient to require a status of completion report to be submitted via email. This will help the facility manager know if the vendors are staying on schedule since weather often affects how vendors perform once the contracts are released. It is always good to be informed rather than surprised later.

Reality Versus Expectations

You might think that at this point you have done everything needed for paint projects for the year. If so, you have missed one of the most important steps, which I call “inspect what you expect.”

When I worked on the vendor side of the business for reputable companies, I often heard about large customers whom the workers, sales reps and company management knew never checked any of the work that was done. It wasn't a secret. They also spoke about the customers who did go out on site and look at the completed projects, most often with words of respect.

Rest assured: If the vendor knew the customer was looking, they were out there checking their work as well. They knew the same thing we know: that the vendor is only as good as the workers who perform the task. Sitting on the other side of the fence, and not knowing that later I would end up as a facility manger, I decided at that time that if I was the customer based on what I saw and heard, I would be one of those clients who checked on my projects.

It's not necessary to inspect every project. Decide what is a fair percentage of restaurant locations to review in each market and/or for each vendor and then commit to and execute every inspection. Give the vendor the chance to meet you again and walk the completed projects with you. Don't require it this time; just ask. You might be surprised how many times they want to meet you on-site.

Finally, don't forget to recognize accomplishments. If the vendor did a great job, send them a thank-you note or e-mail, recognize superb accomplishments at a meeting, visit their home office market and take them out to lunch. Most of the time, vendors only hear complaints and not enough positive comments to truly motivate them.

With these tools, you have now established a positive relationship based on setting expectations, listening first and talking second, inspecting what you expect and, last but not least, recognizing a job well done.

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