

not really what you're looking for. If you're asking if we provide apples, oranges and pears, but we provide bananas, you're not providing us a chance to say that," she says.

Griffin sat down with the client and spoke about her company's core competencies and what they do well, as opposed to what was being asked in the RFP. "We said, 'This is what we think you're really asking for, and we can do that,'" she says.

And, just like that, success. She got the client's business based on this eye-opening experience. In fact, the client came back and asked her what could be improved on the RFP.

Griffin advised him to keep his questions more open-ended. "Allow me to tell you what I can do," she says. "Most distributors don't like RFPs, but it makes them more palatable when there are more criteria. There are so many variables that sound so specific, but they're not. When we're pigeonholed into that kind of response, it's difficult at best to respond."

Cutting Cost Without Cutting Quality

Fran Biderman-Gross says she doesn't even bother responding to some RFPs, but not for the reasons one might think. "Some of them we skip over because they don't care about our feedback and they don't care about the contract, so we spend a lot of time dealing with the RFP explaining to them that they're asking for something they can't use," she says.

Biderman-Gross is president of Advantages Printing Inc. (asi/109385) in Flushing, NY. She says she frequently experiences frustration with clients who don't have a clue as to how they should be marketing themselves – and when pennies matter to companies more than creativity and the end result, her instinct is to look the other way.

"We want to help you get noticed," she says. "Whatever suits you, whatever is the right premium to produce, we're going to research it and help you spend your money. It shows that we care about their dollars."

But how does Advantages stand out from its competitors?

"I'm cheaper on premium items, but why I win bids is because I'm creative on the delivery process, as well as the structure on how we deal with them," she says. "It's a very slow process, but we win more and more because we're authentic about who we are."

Biderman-Gross says standing out is key for a

smaller distributorship like hers. If she doesn't get noticed, she doesn't do business. "I'm consistently challenged with the competitiveness of the industry," she says. "When you're small, you can't afford to manufacture. We should win the bids anyway, but we don't.

"We have to be creative or we're not getting the order. You have to be or somebody will be the same as you, whether it's being timely, the shipping or creativity. It's all about relationships at this point."

Biderman-Gross knows that cost is important to every client, but they shouldn't shortchange themselves on quality. This is why it's important for Advantages to help customers cut costs in other areas – especially when her company isn't the cheapest option in products alone.

Case in point: She won a recent bid with the Health and Hospitals Corporation, a NYC-owned agency with over 40 hospitals, that ran a flu-shot campaign. The order included buttons, bookmarks, fliers, notepads and sticky notes.

Not only did she beat out her competition on the shipping side – Advantages used a local messenger service that was half the price of UPS – but she hired temporary workers to help box the order in two days' time. "We became the distribution hub for them," she says. "They picked us because we paid attention to

detail. They knew we were going to accommodate them. They knew that they could kind of one-stop shop here. They called for advice on their next campaign."

Most importantly, Biderman-Gross was able to suggest alternative products. "You've got to differentiate from location, from patients to staff," she says. "There's a lot of cross-coordination. It's all

"You never know what instigated the RFP. It may be a corporate mandate. Maybe they're looking for minority suppliers. Who knows what the guiding thought is behind that?"

– Leigh Canavan

about the details, understanding what they need."

And having only the one order allowed Advantages to focus exclusively on that client. "The fact that we were small helped them there," she says. "Sometimes there's an advantage if you're small, because you can

accommodate their needs.

"We guide people to a better way of getting noticed. We have to understand what they need to accomplish."

Taking Advantage of Learning Opportunities

Most distributors have at least one good reason to dislike dealing with RFPs. Russ Remaley, president of A to Z Promotions Inc. (asi/101588) in Greensburg, PA, has plenty of them.

"I'm not talking to the person if I'm looking at an e-mail or fax," he says. "But if you get that interaction, you might be able to talk to the person. If you can develop a relationship with them, it makes it a lot better. We all sell the same stuff."

By his own admission, Remaley isn't likely to win a bid on price alone. "I tell people that I'm not going to be the lowest, I'm not going to be the highest, I'm going to be right in the middle," he says, "and 99% of the time, I'm correct in my statement."

But like most distributors, Remaley believes that companies who submit RFPs based on pricing alone are making a mistake. "When I'm seeing there are 20 other distributors on the list, it's a straight lowball (situation)," he says. "It's not, 'Are you going to deliver on time?' or, 'Are you going to give me a quality product and back it up?' It's just lowball price."

But the biggest issue for Remaley is margin. If it's not high enough, he will find better ways to spend his time. "Our average margin in the industry is 32% profit," he says. "Some people will bid at a 10% margin, and I'm just not going to do that. I'm sure some people make some money off them, but if it's just 10%, is it worth it to do the job?"

Remaley didn't necessarily begin responding to RFPs to earn the business. It was more of a learning experience for him.

Five years ago, he bid on an RFP submitted by a municipal authority that packaged everything together: blue jeans, overalls, T-shirts, hats – "the whole shootin' match," Remaley says.

"The guy was an acquaintance of mine. I told him, 'You're better off breaking this apart and doing a one-on-one bid.' There are not many people in our industry that are a jack of all trades. They might say they are, but selling blue jeans is not my nut."

Remaley's advice and refreshing honesty impressed