Public Procurement Practice

SPECIFICATIONS

STANDARD

Public procurement should understand the elements required to accurately define, represent and fully express the requirements of the requestor and should recognize that a specification may form a part of a wider description of requirements. The statement of requirements must establish an accurate description of the need so that the potential suppliers can provide acceptable solutions.

Definition

Specification:
- A precise description of the physical or functional characteristics of a product, service or combination;
- A description of what the purchaser seeks to buy and what a bidder must respond to in order to be considered for award of a contract.

Specifications generally fall under the following categories: design, performance, combination (design and performance), brand name or approved equal, qualified products list and samples. Specifications may also be known as a purchasing description.1

Element 1.1: Specification Characteristics:
The characteristics of specifications for the provisions of services should state the outcome that the user wishes to achieve and may contain elements of both design and performance. (See: Element 1.2, 1.3). Combination specifications also contain these elements and are often used for complex requirements (See: Element 1.4). Specification characteristics:
- Are an accurate, clear, concise and unambiguous description of the product or service including its process and use. This must be written in language that is understood by the target market.
- Must be relevant and objectively support the application or intended use.
- Must provide for maximum acceptable tolerances, enabling fair and equitable competition at both manufacturing and distribution levels.
- Must allow for measurement, performance testing and acceptance or rejection upon delivery or installation.
- Must allow for alternatives within reasonable and acceptable tolerance levels.
- Identify physical, functional, environmental and quality characteristics such as design, size, weight, power capacity, output, or grade of component.
- Identify applicable commercial standards. For example, if using brand name or equivalent, a specific manufacturer’s brand name might be cited to describe the standards of quality, performance, etc. needed to meet the requirements of the solicitation. When a brand or make is identified, there must be a model for comparison to an “approved equal” or better.2
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SPECIFICATIONS (Cont’d)

Element 1.2: Design/Technical Specification:

- A good design specification should be clear, consistent and exact. Reasonable tolerances should be included and should be non-restrictive to encourage competition.
- A design specification provides explicit information about the requirements for a product and how the product is to be assembled.
- Design specifications should list minimum requirements and detail test, sampling and inspection methods that will be used to ensure compliance with the specification.
- Design specifications may have to comply with industry standards. For example, many pharmaceutical products are governed by British Pharmacopoeia for the UK and United States Pharmacopoeia for the U.S.
- A design specification must include all necessary drawings, dimensions, terms, and definitions of non-standard terms, and the materials used must be described in a manner so that bidders will be able to logically discern cost, process of construction, delivery and implementation of the requirements.
- Design specifications should state the desired outcome. These specifications carry a high degree of risk for the buying agency as the buyer will be held responsible for design omissions and related errors in the specifications.

Element 1.3: Performance/Functional Specification:

- A performance specification describes a product or service that provides a general functional recital of performance characteristics required to achieve an end result or outcome desired. The specification should be capable of integrating with existing systems and be interchangeable with parts, services or other basic elements of the operation’s or product’s expected outcome.
- Performance specifications provide the specific outcome that is required but not the method to achieve that outcome.
- Performance specifications contain output and outcome measures and for this reason are often referred to as outcome or output based specifications. Output measures provide for a series of outputs that deliver a desired outcome. Outcomes should be measurable and define benefits delivered so that corrective deductions may be applied, as applicable, if service levels are not achieved.
Element 1.4: Other types of Specification:

Commercial Specification:
- Are usually produced by a national or governing body such as the British Standards Institute (BSI), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM).
- Set out standards for the quality of materials that should be used, the quality of work needed in production and any critical dimensions, chemical composition or allowable tolerances.
- Are used in the production of commercial grade products which are sold by the manufacturer to be more durable, more powerful or longer lasting, or to have a larger capacity in comparison to its consumer grade product counterpart.
- Are designed to meet a more demanding application, operating need, or requirements and generally cost more versus the consumer grade product.
- Are usually of a higher quality or are made of more durable materials, such as motors and bearings being made of metal versus plastic, which are generally not visible to the end user but result in longer product life expectancy and performance.

Combination Specification:
- A combination specification incorporates the features and functionality of a design specification with the performance specification. This type of specification is widely used, especially for complex requirements.
- A combination specification is often used when a single specification cannot adequately describe the more complex products and services.

Element 1.5: Writing Specifications:
- Choose the appropriate type of specification for the identified requirement.
- Clearly identify the supplier’s obligations according to the type of specification chosen.
- Include essential characteristics and a clear statement of intended use.
- Explain all terms and conditions and compliance obligations.
- Provide a clear and consistent methodology for determining if all the requirements have been met.
- Write plainly and concisely, avoiding acronyms and the use of clichés.
- Try to avoid assumptions. If any assumptions are made they must be clearly stated in the specification so that potential suppliers can accept or reject them.

Background

A specification may be contained within a wider requirements description, such as a bid document. The requirements description usually describes what is needed by the organization rather than how it is to be provided. The intent of a good specification is to enable suppliers and service providers to compare their products and services against stated requirements that are presented on an equal basis. It will also allow the buying organization to competitively evaluate solicitation responses and determine functional equivalency, if appropriate.

5. Ibid.