

The Right Vendor Is Not Always the Lowest Bidder

Why selecting the right design, fabrication, and installation partners requires looking beyond the bid price.

By Rob Wyatt

Over the years, I've worked with exceptional architects, designers, fabricators, and technical specialists. I've also seen projects struggle because a vendor who looked perfect during procurement turned out to be the wrong fit once the work began.

The lowest bidder isn't necessarily the least expensive. Equally important, the most technically sophisticated vendor isn't necessarily the right choice. Selecting partners for complex entertainment projects requires a process that starts with qualifications, tests the proposed solution, and continues through contract management.

REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATIONS

1 | Request for Qualifications: The Right Capabilities and People

Before asking vendors to price a project, we need to understand whether they have the appropriate experience, technical judgment, and people to deliver it.

Technical Capability: Appropriate Is Better Than Excessive

Consider an audiovisual system for a regional theme park versus one for a major international destination. A vendor accustomed to high-end attractions may recommend premium audio equipment capable of exceptional results. But does that sophistication make sense for a regional park with a very different capital budget?

If only a very low percentage of guests can distinguish the difference, and a more economical system can deliver a satisfying experience, the additional investment may not be justified. In some situations, the appropriate alternative can cost substantially less without meaningfully compromising the experience.

The objective isn't to purchase the best equipment available. It's to purchase the right equipment for the experience, market, operating environment, and budget. A good technical partner understands that distinction.

The Project Team: Who Are You Actually Hiring?

A company's qualifications matter, but so do the individuals assigned to the work. Procurement presentations often feature impressive executives or sales representatives. Who will actually lead the design, solve problems, and coordinate with the other disciplines? Have they delivered work at this level? Do their processes and working styles fit the project?

During our work in Langkawi, Malaysia, we were developing concepts for an island hotel resort and a retail, dining, and entertainment destination on the main island, including a proposed National Geographic-themed park. I had the opportunity to work with architect Keith Ray, whose experience included hotel and retail, dining, and entertainment developments and previous leadership experience with Westfield, the major Australian shopping center developer.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Keith could quickly translate our objectives into a workable master plan. Working with our talented Creative Director, John King, the team developed an exciting vision for both destinations. Their individual qualifications mattered, but so did their ability to connect, collaborate, and build on one another's expertise.

Great projects are rarely the product of one exceptional individual. They are the result of exceptional people working effectively together.

2 | Request for Proposal: The Right Solution and a Complete Scope

Once a shortlist is established, the Request for Proposal should test more than price. It should establish whether the proposed technical approach fits the project, whether deliverables and responsibilities are understood, and whether the schedule and commercial assumptions are realistic.

Scope Definition: Clear Boundaries, Shared Responsibility

On Langkawi, we defined the respective responsibilities of the concept architect, show design team, and local architectural consultants. Even with those boundaries, disagreements emerged when local code requirements began influencing the concept design. Both architectural teams believed they should have the final say on certain decisions.

Exchanging more emails and drawings wasn't going to resolve the issue. We brought the teams together in person and made it clear that we needed a solution that respected both the creative intent and local regulatory requirements before leaving the room.

That experience reinforced an important point: scope documents establish accountability, but they do not replace collaboration. The RFP should make the interfaces visible, and the contract should establish how conflicts will be resolved.

Commercial Risk: Read the Exclusions

A proposal can appear competitive because essential work is excluded or assumed to be someone else's responsibility. Consider a theatre with special-effects seating. Who supplies the conduit? Who makes the final electrical connections? Who coordinates installation? Who lays the carpet after the effects and seating systems are installed?

CONTRACT MANAGEMENT

Each vendor may have a reasonable scope, yet necessary activities can fall into the gaps. If those gaps are identified during the RFP, they are clarifications. If they are discovered during installation, they often become change orders that consume the owner's contingency.

Reviewing exclusions, interface responsibilities, installation sequence, and change-order provisions is every bit as important as comparing bid totals. A low bid with significant scope gaps can quickly become the most expensive proposal on the table.

3 | Contract Management: Delivering What Was Promised

Awarding the contract is not the end of vendor evaluation. The project team must actively manage technical interfaces, schedule commitments, and emerging risks through design, procurement, fabrication, and installation.

Coordination and Integration: Making the Systems Work Together

Few interfaces illustrate this better than media production, audiovisual systems, architecture, and show design. The AV vendor specifies the projector, lens, and throw distance. The media team produces the content. The architect establishes the building envelope and projection surfaces. The show team integrates the result into the guest experience.

A change in throw distance can affect lens selection; a revised screen geometry can require media adjustments; structural changes can affect equipment locations, access, and installation sequencing. These disciplines must move together, not simply exchange drawings at milestones.

The project management team needs to verify agreed parameters continuously, track interface decisions, and confirm that each vendor's deliverables arrive in the sequence needed for successful integration.

Schedule Commitments: Managing Reality, Not Just Dates

COVID-19 demonstrated how quickly supply chains could disrupt even well-developed schedules. Components that once took two weeks to obtain were suddenly taking eight to ten weeks or longer.

THE RIGHT PARTNER

At that point, simply insisting on the original delivery date did not solve the problem. The owner, vendors, and project management team needed to assess alternatives together: could another supplier provide the item, could an equivalent product be approved, could work be resequenced, or was a schedule extension the least damaging option?

A reliable partner raises risks early, communicates their consequences, and helps develop workable alternatives. Contract management is about making informed decisions as conditions change—not just reporting that a milestone has slipped.

Choosing the Right Partner

The best vendor is not automatically the least expensive, the largest, or the most technically advanced. It is the one whose capabilities fit the project, whose actual team can collaborate, whose proposal defines the work clearly, and whose performance can be managed through delivery.

A disciplined qualifications process helps identify the right people. A rigorous proposal process tests the solution and exposes scope gaps. Active contract management protects the design intent, schedule, and budget when the real-world challenges begin.

Ultimately, we are not simply purchasing equipment, drawings, or fabrication. We are selecting the people who will help turn a creative vision into a successful operating experience.