

Running a tender for the appointment of a new security provider can be mundane. Drab men (it's still invariably men) in drab suits making the same claims as everybody else, with the same qualifications and accreditations ticked in a box.

It doesn't have to be that way. What if prospective suppliers were given a series of challenges to test their claims and give real meaning behind a KPI? What if they were given tasks instead of a presentation to see how they interact as a team and how they might interact with you in a crisis? And what if you put them on the spot, with a deadline and nowhere to hide, and just their wit and skill to see them through?

We took such an approach when tendering for a new manned guarding provider for The Bower, commercial premises in London's Old Street owned by Helical and managed by Ashdown Phillips.

A radical pitch process

Working with Consortio Business Management, we asked each of the four shortlisted companies to respond with a theme of 'space'. Crucially, we restricted the tender team to the CEO/managing director and key operational staff.

The imagination shown by three of the teams gave us an insight into their personality as a business:

one distributed Mars bars, Galaxy and Milky Way chocolates; another arrived in space costumes carrying space-themed toys that members donated to a local children's charity. In an inspired move, this same team named a star after the building.

The third business arrived in suits, much to our initial disappointment, only to throw them off to reveal specially designed T-shirts proclaiming 'Written in the stars'. Only one team failed to respond to the theme and, unsurprisingly, it came nowhere in the reckoning when it made our final decision.

Rather than invite each of the business teams into a boardroom to present, we had a conversation, announcing the first of five tasks to test how well their contracts are supported.

● **Task 1:** We gave them five minutes to text, phone or email to get as many of their staff as possible on site within 30 minutes (albeit within the confines of social distancing). While we waited for them to arrive, we proceeded to the next task.

● **Task 2:** A quiz – not to test their general knowledge but to see how they responded and worked together as a team. We were particularly

“**One team failed to respond to the theme... unsurprisingly, it came nowhere**

keen to see how the contract manager got involved, since it was he/she who would be our first point of contact and we needed to know if we could work with them.

● **Task 3:** We similarly wanted to see how they interacted in the third task, a series of puzzles which they had seven minutes (each) to solve.

● **Task 4:** While all this was going on, their support staff began to arrive and the first were asked four simple questions, simply to show how their responses aligned to what the management team had promised in their tender.

● **Task 5:** The final task was the most serious: teams were led to the loading bay where a suspicious package had been planted. They were given a walkie-talkie, paper and pen and told they had the full cooperation of the existing on-site security team. They had 10 minutes to implement whatever plan they felt necessary to render the building 'safe' and another five minutes afterwards to talk us through the procedure they had followed and why.



GARY METCALF
is associate
director at
The Bower

Key takeaways

Running a tender so differently taught us the following facts:

● Transparency is essential: there are too many occasions when the contract manager has no visibility of the levels of service his sales managers have promised, and that leads to frustration on all sides.

● It also confirmed that whereas procurement is often driving a decision based on commercial submissions, it's actually the operational people that make a difference. They are the people you have to be able to trust and work with in a crisis. It's what turns a 'provider' into a 'partner'.

TENDERS

Pitch perfect

Change the tendering process and be surprised by the results, suggests **Gary Metcalf**

