

# Experts Needed



*Why the way your RFPs are written is setting you up for disappointment and what the industry can do about it.*

**A**s it pertains specifically to parking access and revenue control systems (PARCS), your RFP may not be getting you what you intend. In my career as a manufacturer and consultant of PARCS systems, I have been involved in more than 1,000 parking projects worldwide. In all that time, I have not seen much improvement in the way we in North America go about assembling our thoughts and writing specifications for RFPs.

In the 1970s, specifications were good enough. Systems weren't that complicated and PARCS specs were possibly 25 pages. Today, they are more than 150 pages. Granted, a good portion of that is what we call "legalese," which protects everyone in case something goes amiss. The system can be very complicated, often consisting of mainframes; redundant backup systems; Europay Mastercard, Visa (EMV) requirements; full-blown networks; firewalls that often cause issues; and extensive software that can entail a dozen sub-systems that all have to work together flawlessly. To be fair, there are some good RFPs, but I feel a majority in the past 20 years have been flawed—some worse than others—and it's getting worse every year. It's smart to consider having a consultant write a spec instead of trying to do it yourself.

The advent of the computer and our ability to copy and paste has, in my view, been detrimental to the RFP process. The simple fact is that everyone seems to feel qualified to write a PARCS specification. Parking professionals take excerpts from past systems and add them to new ones and expect it all to work harmoniously. I have seen RFPs that included bits and pieces of three or four PARCS manufacturers' ideas or features all mashed together and some that request unproven products and expect that someone will bid and make it all work. What's worse is that when the bids do come in, they are accepted as meeting specifications when, in fact, they don't.

*By Pierre Koudelka*



## Confusion

I can't begin to tell you how many facilities I have visited after everything was installed to find that the system didn't meet the original specs. This has always frustrated the bidders who tried to do it properly and follow the spec to a T but lost because their price was (naturally) higher. But by then, it's water under the bridge.

In years past, we had qualified engineering firms with parking experience write specs. That has changed—architects, operators, tradesmen of all kinds, maintenance people, and local regional managers all feel they're up to to the task. But are they really? Parking sophistication is often underestimated, and some firms don't put enough resources into their PARCS departments to do it right. Owners, on the other hand, feel if someone has any connection with parking, he or she must be an expert on PARCS. Authors have to be impartial and very technical, understand the IT world, and have carefully studied and analyzed all the major players before they can understand and recommend the various concepts and systems offered. Just because you operate a garage doesn't mean you're a PARCS expert. This is exacerbated by pressures put on writers to keep fees low.

When a system manufacturer has to bid an RFP as written, it becomes clear that many specifications are disjointed and impossible to build as requested. Consider for a moment the confusion over EMV and how some authors, because of a lack of understanding, have confused everyone as to what is really required, wasting money. That's simply not fair to the owners who paid for a good RFP or to the bidders trying to comply. It's to the point where we in the trade can often predict whose spec will be problematic before it even hits the street. Manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors have to work to resolve these gaps or try and come to a compromise, often resulting in a customer not getting exactly what he or she thought was coming. Poorly written specs cause major delays, rewrites, controversy, wasted money, legal action, and worse, some good people their jobs.

Today's systems offer several hundred features and thousands of pages of code. The variable differences within a single feature are immense and require real understanding. Really consider who is best qualified before hiring someone to assist you on spending your money.

Ask yourself when you last saw an RFP that mentioned anything about the quality requirements, equipment longevity, or expected maintenance cost over the life

of a system. Does anyone know? Service cost over time can well exceed the initial system cost and has to be considered. Another aspect that's always missing is quantifying or measuring any feature's ease of use. If the system features you're requesting aren't easy to use or quickly attainable, your staff might not use them. You're wasting money calling for a feature that sounds good but that ultimately won't be used.

Good installation is critical—any cost-cutting can be extremely detrimental, but very little is written in RFPs about the quality of the installation. Why is that? The catch-all phrase is something like, "You are to provide everything necessary for a well-operated system." That's simply not good enough. Why is it assumed that the electrical contractor (different than the equipment distributor) will use the best components and smart switches, terminate properly, and/or provide the

good, clean power? Are they proficient in fiber optics, networks, and will they exceed local codes? I've seen no expansion provisions on conduit runs that open up, exposing wires.

## The Importance of Specifics

How can anyone make an informed buying decision if he or she doesn't have all these facts clearly outlined and quantified? The answer is, he or she can't. The end result is that the consultant, the operator, or someone else will make a judgment call about what to buy. Unfortunately, this often boils down to the individual's preference, existing relationships, past experiences with a vendor, or even worse, just price, rather than a clear, comparison metric of the spec or facts. You might as well flip a coin.

Some say that quality seems unimportant to buyers and it's all about the price. I think it's more about simply not understanding and discerning the real difference in parking systems, and it stems in part from poorly written RFPs. All manufacturers' systems are not similar or equal as specs may imply. There is a measurable quality and feature-set difference. Manufacturers need to do a better job of explaining these differences—I have found many cut sheets provided by manufacturers to be meaningless.

Operators make many buying decisions when it comes to parking equipment, in part because they or their company owners feel they are qualified or it falls within their contractual purview. The car park owner may feel he or she gets a better price that way, but I question that. Price aside, the decision as to what

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equipment to buy may be better made by system engineers and IT specialists rather than local managers, as they may feel pressure from existing contracts. Short-term contracts often result in short-term thinking, and decisions may be based purely on cost. Owners often rely entirely on others for such recommendations without asking the right questions or challenging these recommendations. Purchasing really needs to be a collaborative effort that's based on hard data and a measurable set of metrics. You can buy whatever you like; I just want you to do it for the right reason, be well informed with accurate, up-to-date information, and get what you expected.

### Improving the Process


Here are possible solutions we should consider and implement for a more proficient RFP process going forward:

- It seems to me that some sort of certification program needs to be established, both to certify individual specification writers and assist them in gathering information, developing benchmarks, and establishing metrics to better identify products and services.
- The industry should establish a minimum standard requirement for spec writers. Given the ever-increasing complexities of systems, spec writers should have engineering and IT degrees. Metrics have to be established to better understand and analyze firms and products. Simply saying we want good equipment is not sufficient.
- Spec writers should be required to take IPI courses on a continual basis in specific fields and pass an exam as we do with CAPP to maintain their certification.
- Spec writers should be required to visit manufacturing facilities every two years to determine not only what is new but the factory's quality standard, production tech-

niques, and financial standings. There's no sense in buying equipment from a firm that will not be in existence a year from now. We need to know product life expectancies and estimated cost of maintenance in three, six, or 12 years after purchase.

- We need a method of advising the board as to who and when a spec writer visited a manufacturing plant and verify that all assigned tasks were covered.
- Equipment and systems should be made available for consultants to play with and analyze at their leisure. And specifications should be updated regularly to be more accurate and current.

This may seem like a harsh critique of the process, and those currently writing specs may say it is demanding too much. However, we have allowed the process to deteriorate over the years, and we can't continue to copy outdated and error-filled specs and disseminate them as new, merely because it's easy. We have to start somewhere, and given the importance of PARCS and its ever-increasing cost, why shouldn't there be an accreditation process?

The good news is there are people and associations within this industry that can come together and resolve many of these issues. I believe we have an opportunity and an obligation to manage who writes and how we write system specifications. We can't continue to let manufacturers, distributors, contractors, and bidders resolve glaring errors after the fact. We need to better monitor and regulate this process to keep up with ever-changing technologies. Now is the time to review how we should approach the next decade so we can do a better job for our clients, our industry, and ultimately, the end user—our patrons. The best possible goal we as an industry can have are knowledgeable authors and clients, and it starts with proper RFPs. 

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