

# Tendering for Oral History<sup>1</sup>

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*Increasingly, oral historians are being asked to tender/quote for commissions by large organisations including government authorities. However, many are not used to bidding for work and do not appreciate what is required. Nor do they understand the constraints on their clients that may influence the brief or specification for the work, and the manner in which the tenders will be processed and the contract awarded.*

*This paper is not a prescription, which if followed will assure oral historians of success when tendering. Rather, it is designed to enhance both their understanding of the principles involved and their chances of success. Tendering in a business-like way, will also elevate their standing as professionals, and will increase the awareness of clients of the value of oral history and of what is involved in undertaking successful commissions.*

*For convenience, throughout the paper the terminology relating to “tendering” will include the process of submitting quotations, and the term “client” will be used to designate individuals or organisations that seek tenders for oral history work.*

## **The Challenge**

Quotations/tenders are sought for all sorts of things such as painting a home, supplying goods, provision of consulting services and of course, for oral history work. In most cases it will be a competitive situation as tenders will generally be sought from more than one person or firm, and of course there can only be one winner.

The challenge for a tenderer is therefore twofold: first to make sure their tender is shortlisted for consideration, and second, to convince the client both that theirs is the most advantageous offer and they are the person best able to provide the desired outcome. Even a sole tenderer cannot take it for granted their bid will be successful; they will still need to convince the client they are able to do the required job at an acceptable price.

So considerable care and thought needs to be put into preparation of the tender. Much of this will involve getting inside the skin of the client and understanding his needs, what he is looking for and even uncovering his uncertainties, because not all people or organisations seeking tenders, are what might be called “informed clients”.

In most cases it goes without saying that a person tenders because they want the work. They therefore need to do their utmost to win the job. They will rarely be successful if they produce a casual, unattractive, uninformative, perhaps non-conforming tender, or one that does not convince the client they have the necessary knowledge, skills and experience i.e. a good “track record”.

## **Preliminary Comment**

First it should be understood that in undertaking work for a fee, oral historians are entering into a contract (whether one is signed or not) and so their relationship with the client should be business-like and professional.

Second, these guidelines reflect many years’ experience in obtaining quotations from oral historians and employing them, and of dealing with tenders and administering contracts for a variety of work in a large public authority.

Third, whilst the principles will apply to most oral history work, the degree to which they are applied will vary considerably according to the size and complexity of the potential commission. Whilst this will require oral historians to exercise their own judgement, it is preferable when in doubt, to provide more information than too little, when submitting a tender.

### **Compliance with Tendering Conditions**

Most clients will have spelt out in some detail in the brief, the information required of the tenderer and the form for its presentation. Some authorities, particularly government ones, will in considering and awarding a tender, have to comply with laid down procedures relating to matters such as compliance with the brief/specification, probity, accountability, transparency, value for money, assessed ability of the tenderer, workers compensation and public liability insurance and so on. Some will also have standard conditions that apply to all their contracts and which must be complied with.

Accordingly, each and all of the tendering conditions must be addressed by the oral historian when tendering. Failure to do so will not only reflect badly on them, but could result in their tender being dismissed out of hand as non-conforming.

### **Response to the Brief**

The brief will include a statement of what the task is and what outcome the client is looking for. So the first thing is to read the brief carefully and gain a good grasp of the task. The oral historian's understanding of what the job is about should then be written down in their own words. This will not only prepare a draft "Response to the Brief" for inclusion in the tender, but will help identify deficiencies in the brief and areas of uncertainty.

Where these are revealed, they should be clarified at a meeting with the client. This will not only ensure there is an agreed understanding of the nature of the commission and the desired outcomes, but will establish a personal relationship with the client, as well as indicating interest in the work. Answers to questions should be included in the "Response ..." and if they are complex, confirmation should be sought from the client before the tender is submitted. The final version of the Response to the Brief should address all the points made in the brief.

If not dealt with adequately in the brief, the discussion with the client should traverse as applicable, matters such as the client's management of the commission; responsibilities of the client (what he will do and provide); authorisation to contact interviewees; copyright; methods of payment; time for completion; meetings and progress reporting; format, quantum and delivery of outputs.

In simple cases, much of this can be done over the phone or preferably by email, so there will be a "written" record.

### **Clients**

Clients seeking tenders will vary from those who know precisely what they want and who spell it out clearly in a good brief, to those that have not adequately defined what they want. The range will also include those that know little or nothing about oral history and those that merely make an oral request for a quote.

The last three pose a particular problem, because although they might not have clearly defined (including perhaps to themselves) exactly what the task is and what outputs they require, they will be disappointed if the product does not satisfy them. However, they will not see it as a failure on their part, but will blame the oral historian who, as the "professional", should have

made enquiries and clarified areas of uncertainty. Accordingly, the latter's reputation and prospects of future work will suffer.

A prime reason for commissions not producing acceptable outcomes, most often lies in poor briefing at the outset by the client and a poor understanding of what is required by the oral historian.

This emphasises the need to prepare a response to the brief and to seek clarification where there is uncertainty. Where the brief is singularly lacking, an alternative brief should be prepared and the client's confirmation obtained of its acceptability. In this regard, oral historians should not be fobbed off with statements such as "we merely want you to do an oral history of so and so" or "you know what we want, don't you?"

### **Methodology and Equipment**

Setting out the proposed methodology will give the client confidence the tenderer is competent and will approach the task in a way that will produce the desired outcomes economically. The client will also need to gain assurance that interviewees will be treated with respect, that their contribution will be appreciated and that any confidences or caveats will be honoured.

Many clients like to be appraised of the type of equipment proposed so they can feel confident of the quality of the end product, particularly if it is to be a sound recording. So even if a description of the equipment to be used is not asked for, it is often worthwhile including it in the tender.

The length of the "methodology" statement will vary from quite short for simple commissions, to lengthy for complex ones.

### **CV, Knowledge, Skills, Experience and Referees**

An important factor in awarding a contract will be possession by the tenderer of satisfactory qualifications (academic or practical), experience and successful completion of similar work. Knowing this will give the client confidence and trust in the tenderer's ability to "deliver the goods". Most will also require the names of people who can vouch for the tenderer's competence i.e. referees. So every tender should include such statements.

These days it is easy to maintain a CV on word processor that can be kept up-to-date and can be massaged to suit a particular purpose.

### **Insurance**

Public liability insurance is becoming an increasing problem, as many public authorities are demanding high levels of cover. The cost of premiums particularly to a casual practitioner was prohibitive even before the recent insurance hiatus. This, despite the fact that the risks associated with oral history might be considered minimal.

Unless it can be spread over a much larger business, the cost of public liability insurance could prevent many oral historians from operating, where such cover is demanded. Irrespective, oral historians will need to make their own decisions as to whether they take out insurance.

Where a current public liability insurance policy is required by the client, evidence of it will need to be provided either with the tender, or at least before a tender is formally accepted.

One means of counteracting the high cost of public liability insurance could be for a group of individual oral historians to form a non-profit making company. Members then tender for the work through the company and carry out the work if successful. In this way, the insurance

premium might be shared between the members. However, legal advice should be obtained before entering into such an arrangement.

### **Pricing**

A client may have a number or a combination of reasons in asking for the price to be quoted in a particular format. This may be because the quantum of work required might not be exactly known at the beginning, or the quantum could vary as the project progresses, or it could be to facilitate comparison of tenders. Accordingly, the prescribed format should be used. If it is not, the client in assessing tenders will be trying to “compare apples with oranges” and is just as likely to dismiss a non-conforming tender out of hand.

Any evident deficiency in a pricing schedule should have been discussed with the client early in the tendering period as part of the brief clarification process. However, if problems remain, qualifications should be appended to the formal schedule of prices and/or an additional, alternative pricing schedule supplied.

In many oral history projects the quantum of work cannot be accurately pre-determined. This applies particularly to biographical interviews, where the length of interview will be determined by the willingness of the interviewee to elaborate, their ability to concentrate, the length of explanations, the emergence of unexpected but important experiences and so on. Because of such possibilities, it would be fundamentally wrong to restrict the interview to a pre-determined length. Consequently, lump sum prices would not be appropriate and hourly rates should apply, so that the monetary amount can be adjusted according to the length of interview. Other components of the tender may also need to be adjusted such as travel costs where more than one visit is required, research time can be a variable factor and so on.

Pricing of tenders should be realistic making due allowance for overheads and incidentals such as tapes, stationery, computer use and discs, postage, travel and use of car, telephone, home office, public liability insurance, meetings, reporting etc. Some allowance should also be made for incidental discussions with the client, for answering queries, discussing and quoting for additional work etc., as with some clients and particular commissions, this can take a significant amount of time.

Where changes will not be covered by payment for the actual quantum of work, some contingency amounts may need to be built into prices to cover areas of uncertainty and where the work could take longer or be greater than anticipated.

However, where rates will be applied to the actual amount of work performed, the tenderer should ensure that the addition of a contingency to each of the rates he tenders, does not result in the sum of the rates multiplied by the amount of work shown in the schedule, becoming unreasonably high.

The priced tender form should indicate whether or not the prices are inclusive of GST and whether or not the tenderer is liable for the payment of GST.

### **Submission of Tender**

Tenders must be submitted by the stipulated closing date. Accordingly, tenderers should not only ensure that delivery will not be affected by postal or courier uncertainties etc., but should also be sure of the right address, whether delivery will be by post or by hand. It is not unknown for tenders to be sent to the wrong address, or for them to be taken to the wrong place for lodging.

Most tenders should include:

- a covering letter on the oral historian's letterhead containing their contact details and ABN;
- a cover sheet showing the name of the project as used by the client, the number of the tender if applicable, the closing date and the name of the tenderer;
- an introduction, stating the purpose of the tender;
- a response to the brief;
- a statement about methodology and equipment;
- the tenderer's CV including a statement of their knowledge, skills and experience, and description of similar work;
- a list of referees with contact details;
- the priced tender form; and
- any other material required by the client.

### **Check List**

It is worthwhile using a checklist during preparation of a tender and before it is submitted, to ensure all points have been covered. Such a list might include:

- Are the client and I fully agreed on the nature of the commission?
- Have I resolved with the client matters such as the client's management of the commission; his responsibilities; authorisation to contact interviewees; copyright; methods of payment; time for completion; meetings and progress reporting; format, quantum and delivery of outputs etc?
- Have I adequately described my proposed methodology and the equipment to be used?
- Have I included an up-to-date CV, demonstrating my knowledge, skills and experience, and have I provided details of similar work successfully performed?
- Have I provided the names and contact details of two or three referees, and have I alerted the referees to the possibility they may be contacted?
- Have I submitted the price in the prescribed format (with or without qualifications) and/or provided an additional, alternative pricing schedule to ensure I will be fairly recompensed for my work?
- Have I adequately addressed all the tendering conditions?
- Have I clearly explained any alternatives to the client's requirements, that I have offered?
- Have I noted the closing date and place for the lodging of tenders and ensured my tender will be received on time?

### **Progress Reporting**

Many commissions are so short that reporting of progress will not be an issue. However, there can be delays in completion due to a variety of circumstances, such as the temporary unavailability of an interviewee, illness etc. In such cases it is important that the client be kept informed of what is happening and not "left in the dark".

With longer commissions, clients may require regular progress reports (generally in writing) and possibly meetings. This may be for a variety of reasons, apart from the comfort of knowing that the work is progressing on schedule. It must be remembered that clients have expectations of the work being completed within a particular time frame, they may have deadlines to meet and

funding constraints (money to be spent with a set period), or they may have commitments to others. Consequently, delays beyond an agreed time for completion can be an acute embarrassment and will reflect badly on the oral historian's reputation as a reliable contractor.

Accordingly, whether or not the client has requested progress reports, they should always be kept informed of progress and of potential delays. Forewarned, they can take corrective action and work with the oral historian to recover the situation, or to make acceptable adjustments to the terms of the commission.

### **Planning or Programming the Work**

All oral historians will know that obtaining appointments with interviewees and postponements of interviews, are some of the prime sources of delay to a project. Accordingly and particularly where there are numbers of interviews to be performed, one of the first things to do is to prepare a schedule of interviews and to start making appointments.

Preparation of a flexible work program will also enable successful completion of the work, rather than just hoping that everything will go OK and the project can be completed on time. It can also identify where alternative activities can be performed when others are delayed. For instance if an interview is postponed, it may be possible to undertake research, advance a future pre-interview or to log a completed interview to fill in the gap.

### **Keeping Records**

During the course of a project, oral historians should keep records of their costs and the time spent on elements of the project. By comparing their costs to their tendered fee, they will have early warning of whether or not they are likely to make a profit. It will also provide data in support of claims made for payment for extra work.

Comparing their costs and income at the end of a project, will provide data on which to base future tenders.

### **Reputation**

An important aspect of providing a service to others e.g., being a consultant or an oral historian, is the maintenance of a good reputation. Just as oral historians talk to one another, so do clients seeking their services, which means that reputations for sloppy work or offhanded behaviour are soon broadcast. So effort needs to be put into developing and maintaining a good reputation.

Many things contribute to maintenance of a good reputation, some of which have already been mentioned. Others include responding to an invitation to tender, even if you can't because of work overload. Don't just ignore the request. Send a polite letter which should thank the client for the opportunity, declare your interest whilst explaining the circumstance that precludes you from tendering, and indicate your interest in receiving future invitations.

Tendering in a professional manner will also enhance your reputation, even if you are unsuccessful. Clients appreciate intelligently and thoughtfully prepared tenders and will remember to invite the tenderer to participate, the next time there is an opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

Oral history commissions undertaken for a fee are a contract and must be performed in a business-like and professional manner. This includes the process of tendering.

The purpose of tendering is to win the job and so tenderers need to convince the client they are not only competent, but are the best person offering to do the work and will produce the required outcome at an acceptable price, on time.

The client's brief/specification must be complied with. Tenderer's should avoid making a nuisance of themselves (and thus jeopardising their chances) by providing non-conforming tenders.

The tenderer's understanding of the purpose and nature of the commission, of the desired outcomes and their ability and intention to comply with the client's requirements, must be clearly spelt out in the tenderer's response to the brief.

After winning the commission, the oral historian should ensure they keep the client informed of progress and of any potential delays that could affect completion of the work by the agreed time. Effort should be made to overcome delays (perhaps by altering the sequence of work) so the impact will be minimal and may in fact be prevented from delaying completion.

Programming the work, making realistic allowances for possible delays is important and will help keep the project on track.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Voiceprint' Newsletter of the NSW Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia, No. 27 October 2002.