

# The tender process: boring, but important

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**T**rinity Grammar School in Kew, Melbourne has had a 1:1 notebook/tablet computer program since 1993. The program has been successful for a myriad of reasons, but one contributing factor has been our annual tender process used to probe the market for the best value and service level agreement for our school community.

## Why go to tender?

There are many reasons for an annual tender, here are a few:

- ◆ Due diligence: providing the best possible value for money for the families who invest in the school program
- ◆ It provides an annual opportunity to negotiate a better deal
- ◆ It keeps the marketplace competitive – you want companies to fight for your business
- ◆ You maintain an understanding of what alternatives are available

- ◆ You keep the incumbent vendor/reseller on their toes
- ◆ You drive the agenda of needs – not the reseller/vendor
- ◆ Involving the school community in the process of selection feeds back into the program with advocates for what you are doing and champions for the technology you select
- ◆ You can ask for/get offered more value – whether this is in price reductions or better specs on the machine – if you don't ask, you won't get.

## Limited or public tender?

We do a limited tender: we target vendors who have experience in the education sector or who demonstrate an understanding of the demands of the environment.

My experience with public tendering was not good. We were bombarded with responses

from companies who simply hadn't read the tender document or were trying to make our requirements fit with the product they had to sell. Not only was it time consuming trawling through the masses of half-baked responses, it didn't work. Aside from the experience, I can safely say that I'm not missing much by limiting my tender.

Having said this, it is important to ensure that you are proactive in pursuing resellers who can serve your needs. A competitive marketplace works very much to your advantage.

## The process of developing a tender

First, the school (meaning the teaching and learning people, NOT the techs) need to decide on the appropriate device type (slate, tablet, notebook, netbook, smartphone, iPod touch, etc.) for your environment. It is imperative that a curriculum decision drives the selection of the

device. This is for two reasons:

The cart needs to be behind the horse – the curriculum folk need to know what they want and how the technology will be used to support learning – otherwise the whole thing will go pear shaped faster than you can say “disenchanted school community”.

Second, when you’re explaining the device choice to parents there is sound rationale backing up your decision – a firm grounding for a program will ensure its longevity.

Once the device type has been established, specifications can be ironed out with the school’s technical people to ensure the demands the curriculum people have made can be met.

## What to include in the tender

- ◆ Minimum specs of the machine – be realistic and remember, they’re minimum specs
- ◆ Purchase options/finance – lease/own/rent – what options are available and how will it work? Who do they prefer to work with?
- ◆ Service – how do they (the vendor) hope to meet your service level demands – this is crucial. You must make it absolutely clear what you expect – 24 hour turnaround, loan machines, onsite parts supply, paper processing times warranty/insurance, etc...
- ◆ Insurance – can be an expensive, but is necessary – what happens if one kid (or worse, staff member) damages another kid’s machine?
- ◆ Warranty – for working life of the machine – usually three years.
- ◆ The bag – the bag seems to influence the insurance – at least that’s what they tell us. The bag is a crucial aspect of the whole deal. If it is too heavy (we had a bag recently which weighed 1.2 kg) it undoes much of the good work you’ll have done getting a lightweight device – if that is what you’ve opted for. The bag also needs to be robust, streamlined and look cool – a tall order!

## Responding to the tender

The response to the tender needs to ensure that you have all the information from all of the vendors in a form that allows you to make a clear, considered decision. The problem with this is that companies who respond tend to do so in their own special little ways.

These idiosyncrasies often frustrate your attempts to distil facts in a form which affords comparison. I solved this problem by writing an online survey <http://tinyurl.com/tender2010> with nearly 50 questions, asking everything from the weight of the device with and without the battery to screen resolutions and anything and everything else I could think of. I make completing the survey a condition of the tender. This ensures I get all the data in a form that I can easily distribute to the selection committee for comparison.

I’ve also learnt to add this phrase to my tender documents:



*Failure to complete the online questionnaire or meet any conditions of this tender may render your submission void.*

The reason for this phrase is the inability of many companies to follow simple instructions – some companies (usually the big ones in my experience) seem to respond to tenders using ‘find and replace’ on an old tender response. When they do this, it doesn’t allow you to do your job properly and frankly, if a company can’t take the time to consider your tender, what hope have you got once you’ve signed?

## Realistic timeline

The last thing I include in my tender documents is a clear timeline articulating the process from submission, short-listing, vendor presentation and final decisions. Give companies time to respond and give time for your people to evaluate responses.

## Conclusion

1:1 school computer programs aren’t new, however recent federal funding of the *Digital Education Revolution* has meant more schools from all sectors are now able to avail themselves of the opportunities such programs afford. With limited funds available, it is imperative that money is directed wisely and tendering is one way to ensure you are getting the best deal you can for your students’ families.

Tendering may seem like a whole lot of effort, but knowing you have delivered the best possible value and service-supported computers for your school – involving the school community along the way – is a great reward and will ensure the longevity of your program.

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