

BID TEAM CHALLENGES

How strategic design creates
ADVANTAGE in 2026

Why brand, positioning and content design now
matter more than ever in bids and tenders

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bids and tenders are now operating under greater pressure than at any point in recent years.

166 RFPs a year

40% of company revenue is influenced by RFPs

79% of teams use AI in their response process

50% say bandwidth is their biggest challenge

The latest Loopio and APMP benchmark report shows that the average team submits 166 RFPs a year, RFPs influence 40% of company revenue, 79% of teams use AI in their response process, and 50% say bandwidth is their biggest challenge. At the same time, average win rates have fallen to 39%.

These numbers matter because they describe the real environment bid teams are working in: more volume, more technology, more scrutiny, and less room for weak positioning or mediocre communication. In that environment, design becomes more commercially relevant. It shapes clarity, consistency, confidence and differentiation.

Strong bids make it easier for evaluators to see the value in the response. They bring clarity to the offer, sharpen the message and help the reader understand why that organisation is the right fit. That requires strong structure, clear information design, targeted messaging, disciplined tone of voice, and a brand presence that feels coherent from first page to final appendix.

This is where the opportunity sits for bid teams and the businesses they support. Design within bids and tenders goes beyond how a submission looks. It shapes how the organisation is positioned through look, feel and sound. It turns a core brand narrative into a bid-specific story that is clear, credible and compelling.

WHY THE DESIGN CONVERSATION HAS CHANGED

The 2026 benchmark data doesn't measure the impact of design in isolation.

What it does show very clearly, is the context in which design now operates. Teams are answering more RFPs. AI has become mainstream. Bandwidth is under strain. Messaging and strategic influence are rising in importance. Top performers are more likely to be seen as strategic contributors inside their organisations.

That shifts the role of design quite significantly. It needs to come in earlier, shaping the structure, message and overall experience of the response rather than being applied at the end.

Source: Loopio, 2026 RFP Response Trends & Benchmarks Report, produced in partnership with APMP, based on a survey of 1,533 participants.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO BIDS AND TENDERS

For years, bids and tenders were treated as compliance-led documents: comprehensive, text-heavy and heavily templated.

They were built to prove capability, but not always to support decision-making.

You can still see the effects of that approach in many submissions today: long pages of undifferentiated copy, weak hierarchy, limited visual explanation, inconsistent tone of voice, and too much reliance on generic formatting. The result is often a submission that covers the requirement, but does little to help the evaluator engage with it or remember it.

That matters more now because bid teams are working under greater pressure. Evaluators are reviewing more information, teams are managing tighter timelines, and AI is making it easier to produce acceptable copy at scale. In that environment, a response that is simply complete can quickly become forgettable.

This is where design has a more valuable role to play. A bid should do more than present information. It should guide the reader through the offer, help them understand the value quickly, and make the response feel coherent from start to finish. That means design needs to support the structure of the narrative, the sequencing of proof and the overall experience of reading the submission.

THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN SUCCESSFUL BIDS

1

First impressions

A confident opening creates early trust. Executive summaries, section openers, well-managed layouts and disciplined use of space all signal professionalism, control and care. In competitive environments, that first impression helps shape how the rest of the submission is read.

2

Brand consistency

In bids, brand plays a practical role in building confidence and coherence. Consistent visual and verbal cues help evaluators feel they are dealing with a joined-up business rather than a loose collection of contributors.

3

Clarity and readability

Design helps evaluators process information quickly. Clear hierarchy, proof panels, charts, comparison tables, diagrams and thoughtful typography reduce cognitive load. When key evidence is easier to find and absorb, content works harder.

4

Being remembered

Well-structured information is easier to retain. A strong diagram, an intelligent case study layout or a clear proof sequence gives evaluators something to remember beyond a wall of compliant prose.

5

Positioning

The best bid design makes the value proposition unmistakable. It frames the problem, clarifies the stakes, surfaces differentiators and links proof back to the buyer's priorities. That is where strategy becomes tangible in the document.

BRAND, PR AND POSITIONING IN BIDS AND TENDERS

Brand is the sharpest expression of a company's core narrative.

In bids and tenders, that narrative should not sit apart from the organisation's wider marketing or PR presence. The tender may be a formal procurement document, but evaluators still form an overall impression of the business behind it.

A prospect may already know your organisation through your website, sector campaigns, thought leadership, media presence, social channels or client reputation. If the bid feels disconnected from that wider picture, it can weaken confidence.

The strongest responses feel consistent with the wider brand, marketing and PR story, while still being tailored to the tender.

Look, feel and sound

This is where design starts to shape more than the visual layer of the response.

- Look is the visual system: layout, typography, colour, iconography, charts, diagrams and visual hierarchy.
- Feel is the experience of reading: pace, clarity, confidence, ease, structure and flow.
- Sound is the verbal layer: tone of voice, headline strategy, message hierarchy, proof language and the rhythm of the narrative.

In high-stakes bids, all three need to work together. The document should look on-brand, feel on-brand and sound on-brand.

Why positioning matters when price is under pressure

The 2026 benchmark data shows that price remains the most common reason teams believe they lose bids. When an offer feels interchangeable, price becomes the easiest comparison point.

Strategic design helps shift the conversation away from cost alone and towards value, outcomes, risk reduction, delivery confidence and fit. The most persuasive bids do not simply explain what they cost. They make a stronger case for why their approach is worth choosing.

Tender-specific positioning still needs master-brand discipline

Every opportunity needs a focused value proposition. But tailored does not mean fragmented. The strongest bids translate the wider brand narrative into the buyer's context: their pressures, goals, stakeholders, risks and measures of success. Design helps maintain that balance between consistency and specificity.

WHAT THE 2026 DATA SAYS

– and what it means for design

The latest RFP benchmarks make the design case more urgent. They do not prove that design alone drives higher win rates.

They do show exactly why better design, messaging and positioning matter more in the current market.

166

annual submissions

Average teams are handling more volume than last year. Clean templates, reusable page types and modular content systems are now part of the day-to-day bid process.

40%

of company revenue influenced by RFPs

Bids are commercially significant. When such a large share of revenue is influenced by RFPs, evaluator experience becomes a business issue as much as a creative one.

79%

of teams using AI

As AI becomes normal, generic language becomes easier to produce. Without strong brand and messaging frameworks, responses can quickly start to sound interchangeable. Design systems and tone-of-voice rules help keep AI-assisted content distinctive.

50%

saying bandwidth is the top challenge

Teams do not have time for avoidable friction. Standardised templates, governed styles, reusable visual assets and smarter page architecture help remove low-value formatting effort and free teams to focus on strategy and personalisation.

33

hours to complete an RFP

Time is scarce. Design systems that improve navigation, reuse and review discipline help protect quality under pressure and reduce effort lost to reformatting, rework and unclear content structures.

60%

of top performers seen as strategic contributors

The best teams are more likely to be treated as strategic partners, not just production support. The same principle applies to design: the earlier it shapes positioning, narrative and reviewer experience, the more value it creates.

Skills rising in importance: AI, messaging and strategic influence

The data points to three areas becoming more important for bid teams: 51% say AI and automation skills will matter most in 2026, 48% highlight content development and messaging, and 44% point to strategic planning and deal strategy influence. Taken together, that tells a clear story. Winning responses now depend on more than compliance alone. Technology, messaging and strategy need to work together, and design is one of the disciplines that helps bring them together in a more coherent response.

The report also shows that top performers spend slightly more time per RFP and have more people supporting the process. In other words, winners are not simply faster. They are more deliberate. Good design helps teams use time more effectively and ensures that extra effort becomes visible in the finished response.

COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY BID TEAMS IN 2026

Volume and bandwidth

More RFPs, tighter deadlines and overloaded contributors create inconsistency. Design helps by systemising what can be systemised: templates, page types, content blocks, case study formats, table styles and review-ready layouts.

Complex information

Many bids underperform because the information is difficult to absorb. Good information design turns technical material into sequenced evidence. It makes process, outcomes, governance, timelines and differentiation easier to understand.

AI-enabled sameness

When nearly four out of five teams use AI, sameness becomes a strategic risk. Without clear brand and voice guidance, AI can flatten nuance and dilute distinction. Design provides the structure that helps teams use AI without losing character.

Positioning and value articulation

In too many submissions, the offer is explained but not positioned. Design helps teams answer the harder questions clearly: why this organisation, why this approach, why now, and why it matters for this specific client.

Inconsistent narrative

Different contributors often write from different starting points. The result can be accurate but disjointed. A strong design and messaging framework creates one language, one hierarchy and one story.

Deadline pressure

The right design system accelerates quality. The wrong one creates rework. Under fixed deadlines, templates, component libraries and governed styles help teams move quickly without losing coherence.

MODERN PRACTICES IN BID DESIGN

Messaging architecture first

Before visuals are applied, the strongest bid teams decide what the evaluator must understand, in what order, and with what proof. That is design in its most useful form. It defines the narrative route through the response.

Building reusable systems

Reusable bid design systems outperform ad hoc formatting. The goal is consistency at speed: executive summary structures, case study outlines, credential pages, CV formats, timelines, governance diagrams and quote panels that can be adapted without losing quality.

Designing for human and AI workflows

The 2026 report suggests top performers are more deliberate in how they use AI, including for proposal quality analysis, accuracy, data interpretation and brand and voice guidance. That makes brand frameworks and content design even more valuable. AI is only as strong as the structure it works within.

Structured review stages

One of the most practical ideas in the benchmark report is to review at different stages for different objectives: strategy and compliance first, then clarity and refinement later. That protects the structure of the story before teams get dragged into text edits and personal preference.

Measuring the process

Top performers are more likely to track granular process metrics such as speed of completion, section scores, cost per bid and team member performance. Design should be judged by the same standard: whether it improves clarity, consistency, efficiency and commercial impact.

WHAT SUCCESS SHOULD LOOK LIKE

A polished bid alone isn't a measure of success.

It should be measured by whether it improves outcomes for both the reader and the team producing it. Success looks like:



Clearer executive summaries and faster evaluator navigation.



Stronger reuse of on-brand assets without making bids feel generic.



More confident, value-led responses when price pressure is high.



Less manual formatting and fewer late-stage design fixes.



Better collaboration between proposals, sales, marketing, PR and SMEs.



More consistent tone and brand across multi-author responses.



Stronger shortlist and advancement performance.

Checklist for selecting a creative bid partner

If design is going to contribute strategically, the partner you choose needs to do more than make a document look polished. They should be able to:

- ☐ Understand the bid lifecycle, procurement constraints and review stages.
- ☐ Translate master brand into tender-specific positioning and value propositions.
- ☐ Bring strong information design and long-document typography skills.
- ☐ Simplify complex propositions into clear reader journeys.
- ☐ Build reusable templates, component libraries and bid design systems.
- ☐ Create visual and verbal guidance for ai-assisted workflows.
- ☐ Work comfortably with proposal, sales, marketing and pr teams.
- ☐ Frame value effectively when price pressure is high.
- ☐ Protect consistency without flattening personalisation.
- ☐ Deliver at pace, under fixed deadlines and within confidential environments.

IN SUMMARY

Bids and tenders are under more pressure than ever. More volume, more AI and more commercial scrutiny have raised the bar. That's why design needs a bigger role in 2026.

The most effective design within bids is strategic. It shapes how a company's core narrative is expressed, how tender-specific value propositions are articulated, how proof is structured, and how evaluators experience the submission.

For organisations that want bids to create stronger commercial impact, design needs to be built into bid strategy from the outset.

As a brand and design agency specialising in bids and tenders, NU Creative helps organisations align brand, messaging and design in high-stakes responses so they communicate better, differentiate more clearly and perform more strongly.

Source note: Statistics and benchmarks referenced in this paper are drawn from Loopio's 2026 RFP Response Trends & Benchmarks Report, produced in partnership with APMP, based on a survey of 1,533 participants.