



Use a multi-phase process to partner with the right security contractor

April 11, 2011 - Design / Build

Whether keeping a keen eye on shoppers at a glitzy mall or protecting the image of an international corporation, today's security officer bears little resemblance to the night watchmen of the past. In fact, with approximately 85% of the nation's critical infrastructure owned and operated by the private sector, security officers often form the first line of defense in homeland security. These employees are now expected to perform a wide range of complex duties that require intelligence analysis, sophisticated technical knowledge, and a friendly personality when the post is located at the client's reception desk or front entrance.

Partnering with the right firm can challenge even the most seasoned security director. Tight budgets and directives to do more with less have changed the contracting process to focus more on value and less on the lowest bid. This article recommends ways to look beyond the marketing message to identify a contract security provider that can support the multifaceted mission of a modern security department.

Beyond the Surface

What do you need from a security provider? If you work in an industry with special security challenges - and chances are, you do - you'll need a firm with sector-specific experience. A retailer's research into a firm's current (and past) client list, for example, may reveal impressive healthcare security credentials, but no relevant experience in the merchandising sector. Ask for multiple references that operate in your industry to ensure a track record of relevant success.

In addition to contacting references, companies should seek independent validation of a prospective partner's reputation, experience and specific expertise through news articles and industry research to get a true picture of the firm and its management. Is the organization viewed as a quality provider among industry peers or a low-bid company that cuts corners in officer pay or training to win contracts?

The Support You Need

Learning the details of the security firm's culture and how it compares to the culture of your own organization reveals important insight into how easily the prospective partner will support internal goals. Does the firm provide pre-assignment, site-specific training to its officers so its staff understands their assignment responsibilities? What ongoing training programs sharpen employee skills and prepare them to meet new challenges?

Other areas to consider: What are the firm's internal standards and policies? Does the contractor reward officers for exceptional service or provide professional development opportunities? Are disciplinary policies in place when an officer exhibits unprofessional behavior? The answers will reveal important information about expected service quality.

To help meet internal objectives, set key performance metrics to measure the security firm's support

of both short- and long-term goals. For example, a retailer may need a security partner to help reduce shrinkage. A corporate business needs experienced officers to decrease the number of security breaches, while residential communities often strive to lower crime. In addition, a proactive partner has internal processes to grade itself and to challenge employees to provide better service.

Price Versus Value

All too often, price is the first priority assigned to a security director when bidding out for a contract provider. Low-bid offers can sometimes result in higher expenses if a firm cut its training programs or employee benefits to maintain profits.

Like other businesses, many security companies reduce expenses by cutting employee wages and benefits, such as vacation, healthcare, life insurance and retirement plans. Is the firm's wage and benefit structure adequate to ensure low officer turnover? What is the employer-employee contribution for health insurance? If health insurance is offered but employees are responsible for paying 100% of coverage, few officers will be able to afford the option.

Compare officer pay rates to bill rates to determine whether the security officers are receiving wages below market conditions. Benchmark these numbers against what similar firms of your size in your sector are paying. Look for the risky red flags of high turnover rates, little or no ongoing officer training, and unacceptable hiring practices to find out the true cost of a low-bid contract.

Security firms that deliver value-added services to their clients deserve a second look. For instance, does the company offer tools and systems to help you manage the security program? Site security surveys, business continuity planning, guard force tracking devices, tabletop exercises and training for client employees are good indicators of value-added benefits, if the firm has authentic expertise to deliver them.

The challenge of finding the right firm for your company's needs takes time, research and due diligence. However, this multi-phase process provides the tools you need to help build a successful security partnership.

5 Steps for Selecting a Security Partner

Are you looking for a contract security provider? These five steps will help you conduct a successful selection process:

1. Pre-qualify security contractors to determine their capabilities and identify value-added services offered by the firms. You can interview prospective partners or issue a Request for Information (RFI). Create a short list of candidates
2. Hold a pre-proposal conference to discuss your company's expectations, requirements and responsibilities. Give a facility tour to give candidates a better sense of the property, people and key protection areas.
3. Release the Request for Proposal (RFP) document and specify what information to include in proposals. What are you looking for in a provider? What support material do you want to see?
4. Use a detailed matrix based on your company's specific security needs, expectations of service delivery and goals. Rate firms on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) based on their RFP responses.
5. Invite finalists to make a formal presentation to company representatives. Does their corporate culture and experience fit with yours? How will they help you achieve your goals?

Mario Doyle, CPP, is the regional vice president - New York State for ASIS International, New York, N.Y.