

Interoperable Communications

SPECIAL - Don't Forget The CSSI In Your RFP For An RF Network

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The dispatch console is one of the most vital components of your radio infrastructure. It connects dispatchers to first responders, first responders to the communications center, and agencies to each other. It also helps ensure public safety, law-enforcement and other entities have the interoperability they need to communicate fluidly when events span multiple jurisdictions and agencies.

Indeed, consoles are considered important enough that public-safety experts have required APCO Project 25 (P25) to include a Console Subsystem Interface (CSSI) in their set of open standards.

In this article, we'll first review what makes open standards such as the CSSI so important. We'll then discuss why you should address the CSSI in your Request for Proposal (RFP) for an RF infrastructure, and what's at stake if you don't. Finally, we'll offer several tips for ensuring the CSSI is thoroughly addressed in any RFP you develop for an RF infrastructure.

Why open standards matter

The overarching reason why open standards such as CSSI are so crucial is they enable compatibility across a range of vendors' solutions, so long as those solutions are open-standards compliant. This results in a number of dovetailing benefits:

Interoperability. Because they support broad compatibility across systems, open standards promote seamless, efficient communications across departments, agencies and jurisdictions --even those that use dissimilar radio equipment.

Freedom of choice. With open standards, you are free to pick and choose from a wide range of equipment, features and vendors. This enables you to select best-of-class products that meet your operational and budgetary needs. Open standards also prevent you from being restricted to the proprietary offerings of a single provider.

Healthy competition and fair pricing. Because open standards support choice, they also promote healthy competition among vendors. This has a moderating effect on pricing. Proprietary offerings, on the other hand, depend on exclusivity -- they limit customers' equipment choices by effectively blocking other options from consideration. Thus, proprietary solutions are immune from the forces that foster healthy competition and help keep prices down.

The importance of the CSSI

Where does the CSSI fit into all of this? And why is it so critical to cover the CSSI in your RFP for an RF radio network -- even if you're purchasing consoles later or separately? The CSSI provides the open standards-based wireline connection between one manufacturer's P25 RF network and another manufacturer's consoles. It allows you to select a network and console system from different vendors if such a combination best meets your needs.

If the CSSI is not addressed in the radio infrastructure bid, the CSSI may be ignored. As a result, your choices may be restricted to only those consoles that a proprietary infrastructure will support -- even if those consoles are unable to provide the features, functionality, interoperability or value your agency may require.

3 ways to ensure your RFP covers the CSSI

The following tips will help ensure that your RFP for your RF network addresses the CSSI and related concerns up front so your agency is well informed about various equipment choices, costs, and implications.

Require that bid responses specify how a proposed solution will *maximize interoperability*. To ensure and maximize interoperability, your RFP should flatly state that any features or options that do not comply with relevant standards and are not interoperable with other manufacturer's equipment will not be considered. If the RFP doesn't specify this requirement, your agency may find itself locked into using one vendor, thus losing the benefit of an open, competitive bidding process. A focus on features is important because some vendors promote free or relatively inexpensive proprietary options that only they can offer. In some cases, if these options are used, they can prevent interoperability with other manufacturers' equipment.

Require that bid responses specify how the proposed solution will *maximize value*. Responses addressing value should not be limited to the upfront cost of a solution. They should also address the cost of ownership -- including the costs required to apply periodic software/firmware updates in order to maintain compliance with evolving standards. In addition, in systems where the RF network and consoles are from the same vendor, an upgrade of one part of the system can often force an upgrade of the other part of the system -- whether it needs it or not. The response to the RFP should specify whether the proposed solution will give you the freedom to obtain system components from different vendors, and, if not, whether the solution will require a costly "double upgrade."

Require that bid responses *include the CSSI and its costs*. Including the cost of the CSSI in the bid response ensures that no hidden costs for the interface will arise after the contract has been awarded. Because the total system price is a significant contributor to the award decision, there is an incentive for those bidding on a system to drop their costs for everything, including the CSSI, if the RFP requires this cost to be stated. If the CSSI cost is not required in the bid response, it is not subject to the competitive process. The bidder has less incentive to reduce the price and may later charge full-list price for their CSSI, which can be prohibitively expensive.

To see an example of boilerplate wording you can use to specify the inclusion of the CSSI in your RFP for an RF infrastructure, go to: www.zetron.com/corporate/boilerplate.aspx.

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O'Hara began her career in organizational development at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She currently serves on the board of the Industry Council for Emergency Response Technologies and has served on several other industry boards in the past, including the International Telecommunications Association, the Washington Technology Industry Association and the American SMR Network Association. She was also a member of the FCC's National Coordinating Committee in the 1990's, and has testified on interoperability issues before the House of Representatives.