New England Buying Consortium (NEBC) revised catalog selection process for 2010 gives member stores attending the annual meeting a better opportunity to see and review all vendor proposals before voting.

Beginning this year, buyers see an eight-minute presentation from every vendor responding to the request for proposals. Previously, vendor presentations were 12 minutes, but were split into two concurrent sessions, one for supplies and general merchandise and another for apparel and gifts, leaving stores to decide which to attend.

“The vendors have eight minutes to speak, and they will speak to everybody that is present,” explained Mary Ellen Martin, CCR, NEBC president and director of The University Store at the University of Maine at Framington. “If you’re in a small store, you’re buying the shopping bags as well as buying the sweatshirts. But the vendor who’s doing shopping bags is in the other room and you’re sitting and hearing about just sweatshirts. You would really like to be able to hear both presentations. This way, it benefits the stores and the vendors, because the people from the stores get to hear everything and the vendors get to speak to everyone.”

Also, new for this year is an optional 90-minute second stage in the afternoon.

“Then, after we have lunch with the vendors, we are having a table-top display, so if they want to talk about their products, they will have that option. So, rather than take up valuable time when we need to know about their proposal, a lot of vendors tend to just show us their new products. This will be an opportunity for them to show their products, but also for us to get that concentrated information about their proposal during their actual presentation,” Martin said.

One more change is dues increase to $75 for 2010 after holding at $60 since 2001. “We still feel that we are the affordable buying group. Every member gets their dues back, most of them with the first order they put in. In these tough economic times, we are an opportunity for people to still be in a buying group and not have to put out a lot of money,” Martin explained.

ANNUAL MEETING

NEBC scheduled its Annual Bid Review and Business Meeting for Feb. 19 – 21 at the Highlander Inn in Manchester, N.H. NEBC is paying expenses for hotel and meals for the first 40 members to attend.

Some steps of the catalog review process, though, are unchanged. After the above sessions, the members once again break down into committees and review every single RFP. One committee reviews supplies, one reviews paper products, another shopping bags, etc. Next, each presents to the whole group the pros and cons of the submission. Finally, there is a vote on whether to accept the company as a vendor partner.

PROGRAM ADVANTAGES

To gain a foothold with NEBC, vendors must demonstrate that the programs being proposed offer its member stores an advantage compared with buying direct or some alternative. “Sometimes it involves price, sometimes it involves minimums, sometimes it’s freight or art charges for design work; there are any number of different concessions,” Martin said.

NEBC sends out over 200 bid requests to vendors each year. Last year, NEBC received 54 proposals and the bid review meeting featured presentations from 26 vendors. Proposals are given equal weight whether the vendor makes a presentation at the meeting or not.

“Right now, we have 54 vendor partners for this year,” she said, referring to the 2009 catalog.

VENDOR RECEPTION

NEBC appreciates the support of its vendor partners. “We are going to be hosting a reception for all of our members and our vendor partners to thank them for their support through the years.”
After three consecutive years, NEBC decided not to have a CAMEX booth for 2010, but is holding the reception instead. “We felt we should take a break. The show is on the East Coast, and we are pretty well known up and down it,” she said.

The reception is scheduled for March 13 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the Rosen Plaza Hotel, adjacent to the convention center.

Comparing vendor interest this year to last, she commented, “I think that a lot of the vendors are realizing what our buying power is. With these tough economic times, they’re looking at any way they can to increase their business, so we have had some real strong vendor interest this year.”

Membership is the root of NEBC’s buying strength and increasing industry profile. “I think that now vendors realize that we are in 38 states and the District of Columbia — we’re not just New England. We have 350 members currently, and we serve 1.1 million students. The word starts to get out that there is a lot of buying power when you look at our membership. And vendors are some of our best recruiters as far as getting store members in.”

WEB SITE REVISION
The Web site is undergoing renovation. “As it progresses, we will have a tab there for testimonials. We will be inviting store members to send pictures of their store and their staff, as well as news of any benefits that they may have found by being a member of NEBC. That will give people an opportunity to get their stores and their faces out there. It creates more of a community for us as a buying group.”

NEBC encourages vendors to submit bid responses quickly. The price for a bid submitted by Jan. 15 was $175 and after that rose to $275 if it was received between then and the Jan. 29 cut-off date.

She explained that the benefit of the discount is that it will help vendors to get responses to the RFPs in early, so NEBC can get the proposals online and the attendees will have more time to review the information.

BOARD ELECTIONS
Board elections take place this winter, with the officers installed in February.