



Request for Proposals Polymer Industry Cluster Communications Strategy

Introduction and Background

The Greater Akron Chamber is a business membership organization serving Summit, Medina, and Portage counties. The Greater Akron Chamber drives economic growth and prosperity for the region by supporting the success of the business community and acting as a convener of stakeholders on key issues facing Greater Akron.

The Polymer Industry Cluster Initiative was launched at the start of 2021 to conduct a deeper examination of the region's polymer industry and develop a framework to achieve its full potential. The goal of this work is to elevate Northeast Ohio's polymer industry into a truly dynamic enterprise that is better positioned for strong, sustainable growth in an ever-changing global economy.

Industry Clusters are groups of firms working collaboratively in the same or related industries, that gain a competitive advantage through scale, local proximity, and interdependence. The result is greater than the sum of its parts, where the cluster generates new growth that in turn strengthens the cluster further and leads to substantial organic, compound growth.

The polymer industry is involved in the development and manufacturing of chemicals, plastics, and elastomer products. The cluster is generally considered to be the collection of three different types of organizations operating within Northeast Ohio, and includes all major companies involved in the value chain that convert plastics raw materials into value-added end products for virtually all end-use applications. Northeast Ohio is a leading global locale to add value to plastics, and the capabilities here will prove to be major solution-providers for sustainable materials in the Circular Economy.

The purpose of the Polymer Industry Cluster (PIC) is to elevate Northeast Ohio's polymer industry into a truly dynamic enterprise that is better positioned for strong, sustainable growth in an ever-changing global economy. By convening, connecting, and showcasing our partners, assets, and capabilities, and actively creating resources and opportunities, the PIC seeks to accelerate innovation and catalyze growth.

In October 2023, the Polymer Industry Cluster was awarded the distinct designation as a Tech Hub for Sustainable Polymers and as a recipient of a Strategy Development Grant by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) – the only awardee of a hub designation or strategy development award in the State of Ohio. This designation is a strong endorsement of the region's plan to supercharge a critical technology ecosystem and become a global leader over the next decade. A key component of the award is the funding of a communications strategy for the Polymer Industry Cluster, to be completed no later than June 1, 2025. This RFP is designed to outline the scope of work for this communications strategy.

Project Purpose & Goals

The Communications Strategy for the Polymer Industry Cluster is designed to achieve the following:

- Engage the identified audiences in focus groups to better understand their perspectives as it relates to the industry and the Polymer Industry Cluster. The identified audiences include polymer companies locally and outside of Northeast Ohio (including global companies); non-polymer local companies; industry associations; residents of Greater Akron; economic development partners and educational/training institutions; students at all levels including K-12 and post-secondary, and parents of students at all levels.
- Increase visibility of the work, impact on innovation, company growth and employment, opportunities, etc. of the Polymer Industry Cluster, with messages and calls to action designed for each target audience.
- Illustrate the value of being engaged in the Polymer Industry Cluster on a regular basis.
- Develop a communications strategy that can be leveraged on an ongoing basis to drive awareness and action.
- Communicate the value of the cluster to the region and its people, with a target on those not tied to the polymer industry, to create visibility that the cluster is beneficial for all.
- Position Greater Akron as the destination for polymer research and innovation.

Scope of Work

- **Conduct Surveys and Focus Groups** with the identified audiences to better understand their perspectives relative to the Polymer Industry Cluster and leverage this information to inform messaging strategies that will resonate most with each audience.

The identified audiences have been broken up into six (6) focus groups:

- o **Focus Group #1:** Economic development partners
- o **Focus Group #2:** Educational/training institutions
- o **Focus Group #3:** Students and parents of students at all levels including K-12 and post-secondary
- o **Focus Group #4:** Polymer companies locally and outside of Northeast Ohio (including global companies)
- o **Focus Group #5:** Local non-polymer companies
- o **Focus Group #6:** Residents of Greater Akron

In the proposal, please outline your approach to conducting a focus group. At the conclusion of the surveys and focus groups, a report of findings and data should be produced, an executive summary of the findings and data, and a slide deck that can be used to highlight key points and findings.

- **Develop a Communications Campaign Strategy for Implementation.** This includes an outline of the audiences needed to be reached, recommendations on objectives, content, mixed media, and key messages to reach these audiences most effectively, as well as insights on the frequency and method of communications that is most effective for each audience. Additional components of a tiered Communications Campaign Strategy should include:
 - o Recommendations for the creation of written and digital content, web tools, collateral and other components of ongoing marketing and communications support of the Tech Hubs, informed by the survey results
 - o A timeline for implementation
 - o Metrics for tracking the effectiveness of the communications strategy

- Written and digital content development for ongoing marketing and communications to support the Tech Hub

The Communications Strategy, including each of the components above, is the deliverable. The Communications Strategy should also include a tiered implementation plan (i.e. basic, intermediate, advanced) that specifies different tactics by spend and budget.

While there is a possibility for the same firm who completes the Communications Strategy to implement it longer term, that is a separate scope of work and not included in this scope of work.

Budget and Constraints

The Tech Hubs strategy development grant allows for the following budget for the development of this Communications Strategy:

- Focus group and survey efforts: \$30,000
- Development of a tiered Communications Strategy: \$40,000

If the selected vendor is projected to exceed the outlined budget above while work is underway, a written notice should be delivered to the client followed by a call with the client to outline next steps.

Vendor Qualifications

Interested vendors must meet the following qualifications:

- **Experience:** Vendors should have a proven track record with similar communications projects, especially those involving federal grants. Demonstrated expertise and experience in non-profit/local government, and knowledge of polymer markets or advanced manufacturing a plus.
- **Expertise:** Vendors should have current/leading edge expertise in survey techniques and focus group design and analysis, along with proficiency in the areas needed to meet the deliverables of the Communications Strategy. These include but are not limited to expertise in the areas of web design, public relations, communications and messaging, digital marketing, etc.
- **Strategic Insight:** The vendor should have a solid fundamental market- and technical-knowledge for polymers and demonstrate the ability to provide strategic insights, develop effective messages, and lead campaigns that align with the Polymer Industry Cluster's goals and outcomes.
- **Creativity:** The vendor should be able to think creatively and propose innovative solutions, which can be crucial for a communications strategy.
- **Resource Availability:** The vendor should have the necessary resources, including a skilled team and technological capabilities, to execute the strategy effectively. The vendor should also have the capacity to devote needed resources to this project to deliver an on-time product.
- **Financial Stability:** The vendor should be financially stable and ensure they can maintain service throughout the duration of the project.

- **Compliance:** The vendor must be compliant with all relevant federal regulations and guidelines, particularly those related to handling grants and sensitive information.

The awarded vendor is permitted to identify contractor(s) to support the execution of this proposal, as desired.

Submission Guidelines

This RFP will be open from November 8, 2024 until 5:00pm on December 2, 2024. Proposals should be submitted via email to Brynn Popa, Executive Vice President at the Greater Akron Chamber at bpopa@greaterakronchamber.org.

All proposals should be submitted with explanations of the vendor's qualifications (referencing the prior section), along with the following:

- Explanation on why the vendor is interested in working on this project
- Proposed approach to the project, including whether a contractor(s) will be used to support the work
- Key differentiators and specialties of the vendor
- Certifications of note
- References
- Cost outlines for each area of the project
- Outline of the expectations the vendor has of the client in the project
- Any conflicts of interest that exist

Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on their answers to the items noted above and vetted by a diverse group of professionals and based on the following

Timeline

- Proposals open: November 8, 2024
- Vendor Q&A (virtual): November 15, 2024 from 3:00-4:00 pm
- Proposal submission deadline: December 2, 2024 at 5:00 pm
- Evaluation period: December 3 – December 9, 2024
- First round of vendor finalist notification: December 9, 2024
- Phone interviews with vendor finalists: December 11, 2024
- Backup date for phone interviews with vendor finalists: December 20, 2024
- Vendor selection: December 31, 2024
- Start of the project: Please illustrate your project timeline in your proposal with a completion date of June 30, 2025
- Completion of the project: June 30, 2025

Post-Award Requirements

- **Review and Acceptance:** Included in the timeline of the project will be clearly articulated milestone reviews as well as dedicated resources to ensure consistency in execution of strategy and tactics and acceptance periods. Both parties will be expected to abide by these in order to keep the project timeline in effect.

- **Dispute Resolution:** The vendor and client will establish a regular cadence of meetings. In the event that there is conflict, disagreement or failure to meet expectations, the vendor and client should surface it first in writing and discuss it during the next regularly scheduled meeting

Terms & Conditions

- **Payment Terms:** Proposals should include payment terms.
- **Performance Standards**
 1. **Quality Standards**
 - Accuracy: The data and corresponding recommendations for the surveys and focus groups should be based on a statistically significant sample size.
 - Completeness: 100% of the deliverables must be completed by the project end date.
 2. **Timeliness**
 - Milestone Deadlines: 90% of project milestones must be met within the specified deadlines.
 - Final Deadline: Project must be completed by June 30, 2025
 3. **Efficiency**
 - **Cost Control:** Project costs must not exceed the budget by more than (insert %), and if they are to exceed the budget, the vendor must notify the client before excess expense is incurred.
 - **Resource Utilization:** Utilization of staff resources must be within 85-95% efficiency.
 4. **Customer Satisfaction**
 - Feedback Mechanisms: The vendor should have a mechanism to gauge the client's satisfaction on the work throughout the process.
 5. **Risk Management**
 - Contingency Plans: All risk mitigation plans must be submitted within the first 30 days of the contract.
 - Issue Resolution: All issues must be resolved within 5 business days of identification.
 6. **Special Clauses**
 - Data Rights: the data obtained through the surveys and focus groups will be the property of the Greater Akron Chamber.
 - Intellectual Property: The Greater Akron Chamber will own the intellectual property developed during the project.
 - Ethics and Conflict of Interest: Requirements for ethical conduct and avoidance of conflicts of interest.