



## 10 WAYS TO IMPROVE THE IMPACT OF YOUR PROPOSALS

by Leigh Wallinger

The words “*Can you send me a proposal?*” is your invitation to pitch for a piece of business, but is it a good thing to hear from your prospect or a bad thing?

It will be a good thing if this buyer always makes his or her purchasing decisions based on a proposal. It will be bad news if the buyer isn't really interested but who doesn't want to tell you this directly. All salespeople have, at some time or another, spent significant time and effort producing a proposal only to find the buyer didn't have the authority to place an order or you hadn't fully understood the buying process.

It's up to you, the salesperson, to make sure you understand exactly why you have been asked to submit a proposal. You have to ascertain whether the buyer is going to act on your proposal or whether it's no more than a way to get rid of you. Given that writing a contract-winning proposal is an increasingly costly and time-consuming process, no organisation can afford to invest in producing proposals for poorly qualified prospects.

Picture, for a moment, the last time you submitted a proposal to one of your prospects.

- How much effort did you personally contribute to the proposal?
- How much effort did it take overall?
- Why did you respond with a proposal when asked by your prospect?
- How easy was it to read?
- How well had the requirements been qualified and checked?
- Did the proposal contain evidence that your Company could do the job?
- Did you understand the decision-making process of your prospect and the role of your contact?
- Did the proposal focus on the reader rather than you.
- Did the document focus more on the buyer's organisation than on your own Company?
- Did you provide a detailed financial justification within your proposal and reasons why the contract/order should be placed with your Company?
- Did you ever consider what your competition would be doing?
- And, did you eventually win the business?

Here are 10 easy to apply tips to improve your chances of winning the business in future by improving the impact of your proposals.

### **Tip 1 Know the intended audience**

It is almost certain that your proposal will be read by more than just your contact. Make sure you know who is likely to read it and what their interest will be. Which Departmental Heads will read it? Will it be reviewed by the Board?

### **Tip 2 Get inside the mind of the reader**

When you know who is likely to read your proposal, you should spend time understanding what their interest and motivations will be. If you ensure the proposal relates to each different reader, it will stand head and shoulders above other proposals. Ask yourself why a certain individual will read the document and make sure you address their likely concerns.

### **Tip 3 Write the document with the reader in mind and make it readable**

This is an extension to the last Tip and one that is often forgotten by suppliers producing proposals. If you know Board members will review the proposal, don't use buzzwords, industry jargon or acronyms. If you must submit proposals containing this sort of material,



make use of Appendices. Make the document easy on the eye and easy to read. Plenty of white-space will help greatly. Short sentences are critically important.

**Tip 4 Use the right structure**

If you are given instructions by the buyer regarding the format of the response, follow them exactly. Do not try to be different. A request for a set format is usually a sign of how the recipient organisation will breakdown the assessment process, especially when they expect to receive a number of competitive proposals.

**Tip 5 Change the focus from “us” to “them”**

Write your proposal with the focus firmly on the buyer, the buyer’s requirements and how your proposal addresses these requirements. Avoid paragraphs that simply describe features about your Company or its products. Link these to some aspect of the prospect’s requirements and ensure your paragraphs contain numerous occurrences of “you” and “your” and far fewer of “us” and “we”.

**Tip 6 Make it personal and keep the length appropriate**

Make the document read as though it has been written specifically for this prospect, even though it may contain material common to most of your proposals. Keep the material you use as relevant as possible. Ensure the final document is of a size that is commensurate with the value and complexity of the potential purchase. A proposal to replace a piece of manufacturing machinery will be larger than a proposal to train all office staff in how to use MS Office.

**Tip 7 Focus on the benefits of your product / service**

When you are writing your proposal, keep applying mentally the phrase “..which means that...” to your paragraphs. Try to link all the material you use back to some aspect of the requirements. When you are reviewing the document, keep the “So what?” test close at hand. Be critical and ensure you deliver a client-focussed document.

**Tip 8 Justify the cost with value**

Sometimes it is tricky to justify your costs when there are strict instructions on how to present pricing details. This is especially common in competitive tendering situations and in the Public Sector, where prices are reviewed separately from the “technical” review. If the buyer defines a structure for the proposal, it is critically important that you follow this format. If you are asked to submit pricing forms, add extra material that reconfirms the benefits of your proposal and then provide the cost justification.

If you know that the proposal’s costs will be reviewed separately from the main proposal document, be alert enough to reiterate the benefits and value of your proposition in both parts of the document, taking care not to fall foul of any “Instructions to Bidders” that might exist.

**Tip 9 Drop the boiler-plate material**

Don’t use boiler-plate material that is easily identified as such. It weakens the impact of your proposal and is probably written in such a vague and generic manner so as not to be of much value. Remember (Tip 5) to change the focus from “us” to “them”, even in the boilerplate material you do decide to use.



**Tip 10 Provide an Executive Summary**

Make it easy for the top tier of management to assimilate the whole proposal by proving them with an Executive Summary. This should summarise the main points of the proposal and reiterate the value and benefits that acceptance of your proposal will provide to the prospect.

The length of the Executive Summary should be appropriate to the length of the proposal. Remember that the most senior managers reading your proposal will be very attuned to the likely risks associated with a decision to adopt your proposal. You should summarise the main risks and how you plan to minimise their likelihood of occurrence and their potential impact. For larger projects, it might be appropriate to produce a draft risk register.

The next time you have a proposal to write, apply these 10 simple Tips and see how much more of an impact your document makes.

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