

## Five Steps to Better Bids

**What is your current win rate for bids and proposals? In the professional services sector win rates of 1 in 3 are average. However the reality is many firms are not even getting close to this figure while those that produce consistently top quality proposals are achieving much higher rates. In this article Ivor Stevenson discusses the importance of producing quality proposals and provides advice on the strategies consultancies should adopt to 'raise the bar'.**

### *Bids that win or bids that lose?*

In twenty years in consulting I haven't heard many bid teams identify the quality of their proposals as the reason they are not winning enough competitions. More often than not losses are attributed to aggressive pricing of competitors or a prospect who just didn't understand what was on offer. Maybe...but even so, it does not absolve the bid team entirely of responsibility. Losing on price suggests the proposal did not communicate enough value. A prospect who "just doesn't understand" is generally one who for whom the offer was not appealing enough.

In truth, many proposals overwhelm those who read them and that is particularly true of those submitted by professional services firms. Research by Huthwaite International found over 50% of business developers came to the conclusion that if they were in their prospect's shoes, their own proposals would not persuade them to buy. To add insult to injury, 75% admitted they found some sections of their own proposals so boring that they would skip the pages.

So what can be done? Experience working with a wide variety of firms has led Shaping Business to conclude there are five principles that if adopted, have the power to radically improve the quality of your proposals and overall win rates.

### *One – invest time in really understanding the prospect's needs*

How often do you see a bid team receive an ITT from a prospect and with little further contact set out to write a proposal? As a result the majority of the bid budget is spent on solution development and little on exploring prospect needs. Yet all the evidence suggests that uncovering and understanding prospect needs is one of the biggest contributors to business development success. That understanding is built through dialogue and interaction with the prospect, enabling you to unearth their 'big picture' objectives; the priorities and success criteria of key stakeholders and developments in their needs especially during extended procurement

processes. Articulating this understanding through your proposal is vital in building the prospect's confidence that you really understand their situation.

### *Two – demonstrate benefits not features*

Features are attributes of your service which may or may not provide value to the prospect. In other words the prospect is left to decide whether the features matter to them or not. A benefit is the actual value a prospect experiences by consuming your service, because it addresses their specific needs.

---

### *Many proposals overwhelm those who read them and that is particularly true of those submitted by professional services firms.*

---

The fundamental trigger for a buying decision is when we perceive the cost of a service to be less than the value or benefit it will deliver. Research shows that by identifying features that address specific needs and emphasising the benefits to the prospect, you significantly increase your chances of success and moderate the importance of price in the decision. To do this you need to be able to get inside the head of your prospect and see things through their eyes. That means constantly challenging yourself about why the prospect should care about what you have to offer and articulating the answers clearly throughout your proposal.

### *Three – differentiate on things that matter*

Do you have a section in your proposals highlighting why the prospect should choose you above your competitors? What is in there? Headcount, number of offices, international reach, team culture?

It is certainly good practice to draw the prospect's attention to your differentiators, reminding them of the unique set of qualities you bring to their situation. However, to be effective the prospect must be able to see how a differentiator directly impacts your ability to do a good job for them. So for example, it's not useful to cite 'international reach' for the sake of it, but it is valuable to say international reach matters because the success of the project depends on complex cross-border working.

Unfortunately, over the years we have seen many lists of differentiators that leave the prospect thinking “Why are you telling me this?” So when you cite your differentiators check they really matter to the prospect by asking “So what?” from their standpoint.

If they don't matter, remove them from the proposal.

#### **Four – develop an accessible document**

Have you ever sat down to read a proposal only to find yourself lost in a sea of detail and unclear what the proposer is trying to tell you? That's not to say the actual content wasn't relevant – it usually is – but did the way it was presented make it inaccessible?

The best proposals keep the reader's interest by using a logical structure that can be easily navigated by readers with varying priorities and who want different levels of detail. Good proposals also address prospect needs explicitly using clear and concise language. A document editor can be of value in this regard, especially one that is also able to coach consultants in their effective use of language.

Getting the right level of detail into the document is also very important. The fact is most proposal writers are experts in their chosen field and will tend to supply more detail than is actually needed by readers. To counter this, an effective bid leader should spend time assuming the prospect's perspective and constantly asking what really needs to be included. More and more detail does not necessarily equate to a higher evaluation score – it can equally bore your audience and reduce your chances of success.

#### **Five – develop an attractive document**

“Nobody wins a bid because of a fancy looking document.” Absolutely – but bids can be lost if the document you produce does not encourage readers to pick it up and engage with the content. So take a look at your proposal, does it invite you to pick it up or is it an anonymous looking document likely to stay at the bottom of the pile?

The stark fact is the average decision maker will probably be faced with reading several proposal documents for any sizeable decision. Few people will read all the documents, so the ones that look attractive have a better chance of at least being picked up. If they do open it, will they find pages and pages of text or colourful graphics delivering key messages with impact? It may not be popular with your consultants, but paying attention to the look and feel of your proposal puts the content in the best possible light and will increase your chances of winning or progressing to the next stage.

#### **Increased chance of winning**

Given that a proposal is often the first tangible deliverable a prospect receives from you, it is vital that it is of a high quality and differentiates your offer around their specific priorities. If a prospect feels the document is tailor made for them they have more reason to believe that you will be attentive to their needs when you come to deliver your services. Unfortunately, it only takes the time to read a few proposals produced by professional services firms to see that they often do not live up to these standards. Adopting the five principles outlined above provides a way for professional services firms to increase their chances of winning business in what is an increasingly competitive marketplace.

#### **Contacts**

This viewpoint is registered with the UK Copyright Service. You are welcome to share or print the original attributed version with your colleagues.

To discuss how we can help you improve the quality of proposals, please email the author:

Ivor Stevenson ([ivor.stevenson@shapingbusiness.com](mailto:ivor.stevenson@shapingbusiness.com))

#### **About Us**

Shaping Business is a specialist marketing consultancy focused on helping professional services firms to grow. We provide tailored strategic and operational support to enable our clients to effectively engage with their target markets and deliver a more successful sales pipeline.