

# Preparing Winning Proposals

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Writing effective proposals is obviously a critical part of winning new business. Yet few firms in our industry excel at it. Does this suggest that writing great proposals is beyond the reach of most firms? Not at all. There are some basic, practical steps that you can take to substantially improve your success rate—steps that for whatever reason most firms ignore.

This document briefly outlines those proven strategies for preparing winning proposals. The basic proposal process is illustrated below:



## Preproposal Positioning

Proposals are typically won or lost before the Request for Proposal (RFP) is released. That's not to say that a strong proposal isn't important. But a good relationship with the client goes a long way towards ensuring your proposal has the maximum impact. Keep the following goals in mind as you work the sales process prior to the RFP:

**Build the relationship** by becoming a valuable resource to the client. Serve, don't sell. Help the client define the need, evaluate possible solutions, and choose the best one. In this way you demonstrate your value far better than any proposal could ever do.

**Manage the "complex sale"** by contacting all key decision makers. Failing to do so is a common shortcoming in the sales process. Each decision maker will bring his or her own set of priorities to the selection. Do your best to uncover what those are before the RFP is released.

**Identify key project drivers**, those factors that will most shape the client's definition of project success. Take care not to over-emphasize the technical issues. Uncover the client's strategic and personal needs. They

often carry more weight in the selection than the technical issues that engineers and architects are prone to focus on.

**Uncover the true selection criteria.** These are rarely found in the RFP. As noted above, you need to identify the strategic and personal (felt) needs that matter most to the client.

**Develop the winning strategy early.** The best way to know you have the right approach is to ask the client. Better still, develop the approach with the client's help. But you don't get the chance to do this after the RFP is on the street.

## Analyzing Opportunities

**Commit to doing fewer better.** Most firms submit too many proposals, the majority of which they have little to no chance of winning. While the industry median win rate is supposedly about 40%, in my experience most firms hover in the 20% to 25% range. That's not good enough. You should commit to submitting fewer proposals (by being more selective) and winning more of them (40% at a minimum).

**Client contact prior to the RFP should be required.** I advocate a “no contact, no go” policy, meaning if your firm hasn't been talking to the client before the RFP is released, the decision is *automatically no go*. Your chances of winning in that scenario are typically near zero. There are always exceptions people will point to—so your policy should be flexible—but there are better ways to spend your business development time and money.

**Complete the go/no go decision process.** Every proposal opportunity should be subjected to a formal go/no go decision. You can download a helpful matrix for this from my website ([www.bizedge.biz/toolbox](http://www.bizedge.biz/toolbox)). The goal isn't simply to fill out a form, but to make an honest assessment of the opportunity. Be sure to include some objective parties in the process.

## Planning the Proposal

**Don't trust the RFP.** You should, of course, carefully read and adhere to every detail of the RFP. But don't depend on it to give you the insights you need to prepare a winning proposal. That requires dialogue with the client, hence the “no contact, no go” policy. *Plan on a significant effort in talking with the client, researching available resources, and visiting the project site.* If this is not possible or worth the effort, then don't submit.

**Use the go/no go analysis to plan the proposal.** *Take the decision process seriously.* It should yield not only your go/no go determination, but a critical assessment of your firm's strengths and weaknesses that should influence the proposal's content. Obviously, the proposal should seek to leverage your strengths and neutralize your weaknesses.

**Identify differentiators, not just strengths.** *Remember, the goal isn't to demonstrate that you're qualified; you must convince the client you're a better choice.* In most cases, this will be difficult. But don't proceed until you've satisfactorily answered the question: "Why should the client select us?" Keep in mind that differentiators rarely arise from qualifications and experience. Most likely they will come from *your relationship with the client, your understanding of the project, or your proposed solution or approach.*

**Address weaknesses and vulnerabilities.** You are more likely to lose due to perceived shortcomings than to win based on your strengths. Once you have identified the apparent selection criteria, you should determine how your firm can reach the "line of parity" for each one—that is, the point at which most competing firms are generally equal. Don't ignore or gloss over any apparent deficiencies. *Ask, "What factors might prevent the client from selecting us?" and determine what steps you can take to neutralize or offset them.*

**Always hold a kickoff meeting.** This provides an opportunity to brainstorm strategy and plan the preparation process. *Any proposal worth doing deserves a kickoff meeting.* An important part of the kickoff meeting is defining assignments and deadlines, including securing commitments to meet those deadlines.

### Go/No Go Criteria

- Have you contacted the client? What is the strength of the relationship?
- How well do you understand client needs and project requirements?
- How well positioned are you versus your competitors?
- How qualified are you for this project?
- Are the people you need to win and execute this project available?
- Does the profit potential for this project meet your goals?
- How much does price determine who will be selected?
- Is the cost to respond reasonable relative to your odds of winning?

## Proposal Content

**Keep the focus on the client, not your firm.** One of the most common shortcomings of proposals in our business is a lack of client focus. We

typically place more emphasis on selling our credentials than describing how we'll meet the client's needs. To be fair, this emphasis is often encouraged in the solicitation. But don't fall into that trap (remember, don't trust the RFP!).

The RFP reflects the formal procurement process, but usually not the *true* selection criteria. These typically are: *How well do you understand my problem? What solution do you propose? Why do you think that is the best solution? How will you ensure the expected results? What will it be like working with you?* Whatever form your proposal takes, it should answer these crucial questions (without ignoring what the RFP asks for, of course!).

**Identify and develop your key messages.** Despite what the RFP may suggest, most selection decisions hinge on just a few key points of differentiation. The goal is to highlight those points in your proposal. (This assumes, of course, that you've uncovered these in the sales process.) In developing your key messages, keep these guidelines in mind:

- **Identify no more than 3-5 key messages that you want reviewers to remember** from your proposal. These form the core of your proposal content.
- **State each key message in a simple phrase.** If it takes more than a few words to express any of your key messages, it's probably too complex to be remembered.
- **Determine what supporting evidence should be provided for each key message.** Simply list this information at this point, before developing it into narrative form.
- **Order this supporting information based on importance.** This is the journalistic principle of the "inverted pyramid." Start with the most important information, then the less important. This facilitates skimming.

Of course, you have to fit this approach within the overall structure of the proposal, whether specified by the RFP or as described below.

**Structure the proposal as follows, unless the RFP specifies otherwise.** The recommended structure for the typical proposal in our business is as follows:

- **Executive Summary.** Always include an executive summary unless the RFP forbids it. This is the essence of your proposal, reduced down to a concise 3-5 pages. Make it skimmable! (more on this below) A good place to start is to imagine you had two minutes to make your proposal

orally. What 4-5 key points would you make? (Are those points client focused?) These are the core of your executive summary—and your proposal!

- **Key Issues.** This section is essentially the problem definition. Key questions you should try to answer in this section are:
  - What needs are driving the project?
  - What is the client’s vision for the project?
  - What are the client’s priorities and concerns?
  - What are the critical success factors?
  - What are the greatest challenges?
  - What other stakeholders are there and what are their concerns?

Remember: Don’t neglect the nontechnical issues; *these* typically constitute the principal drivers for the project—not technical issues.

- **Project Approach.** This is the description of your proposed solution. Typically this section should answer the following:
  - Why did we select this solution over other possible alternatives?
  - What are the expected outcomes from implementing our recommended solution?
  - How will we execute the work?
  - What are the potential risks and how will we address them?
  - What is the schedule and critical junctures in that schedule?
  - What steps will we take to ensure we meet budget, schedule, and quality expectations?
  - How will we optimize the working relationship and deliver great service?
  - How will we effectively engage other critical stakeholders?

Avoid a boilerplate write-up or detailed task list (this is best included as an appendix).

- **Relevant Experience & Qualifications.** Keep in mind that you’re rarely more qualified than your competitors. So how can you strengthen this part of your proposal? By answering the following:
  - What are the specific *benefits* of our relevant experience?
  - What were the successful *outcomes* of the featured projects?
  - How did we add *value* for our clients?

- **Project Team.** If the client is familiar with key members of the team, you might want to put this before the experience and qualifications section. There are probably two things the client is most interested in:
  - Did members of our team work on the projects highlighted above?
  - Will the people we’re proposing really be available?

Resumes should be no longer than a single page (less is usually better). Of course, always include an organization chart.

- **Proposed Fee.** If the client is asking for this, it is undoubtedly an important part of the selection process no matter what weight might be assigned to it in the RFP. Pricing strategies are beyond the scope of this document, but I will note that you *often need to compromise the ideal scoping and staffing* to achieve a winning fee.
- **Appendices.** These are best reserved for more detailed information that might disrupt the flow of your narrative if placed earlier in the proposal. Examples include work breakdown structure, detailed data tables (use summary tables in the narrative instead), full-page resumes (use quarter- or half-page summaries), or forms (e.g., insurance forms).

## Proposal Design

The design of your proposals goes well beyond simply making them attractive. *Good design facilitates communication, and thus is every bit as important as the content.* In fact, the preparation of content and its presentation are inseparable.

Design involves more than simply page layout, use of color, and insertion of graphics. Writing is an important part of design. For example, consider the difference between presenting your content in bullet points versus long blocks of text. Which is easier to read? For this reason, proposal writers should be familiar with some basic principles of proposal design.

Effective design is predicated on some fundamental assumptions about how clients review your proposals. Here are some key assumptions to keep in mind:

- **Most reviewers don't read your proposals word for word; they skim.** This argues for making skimmability a critical design objective.
- **Many reviewers do not read from front to back, nor do they read the whole proposal.** Thus you should make it easy for the reviewer to find the specific information he or she is looking for.
- **Selection decisions are typically made on the basis of one or two points of differentiation.** Hopefully you have uncovered what those points are likely to be, so you can highlight them in your proposal.

### Typical Proposal Structure

- Executive Summary
- Key Issues
- Project Approach (incl. schedule)
- Experience & Qualifications
- Project Team
- Proposed Fee
- Appendices

With these assumptions in mind, let's review some critical design objectives for proposals:

**Present information at two levels: skim and read.** One of the primary weaknesses with the average proposal is forcing the client to do too much reading. An effective proposal allows the client to skim for key information, then read for more detail if he or she chooses. Think about it: That's how publications like *USA Today* and *Consumer Reports* are designed. While you can get the news in less than five minutes, you can also spend an hour or more reading the articles in detail if you want. But you *don't have to* to get the most important information.

*This document illustrates a recommended way to present written information in your proposals so that it can be either skimmed or read for more detail.*

**Highlight your key messages at the skim level.** Put them in bold headings, supported by figures, bullets, simple tables, pictures and captions—using the same design principles that allow you to skim the newspaper. If you want to be really innovative, use headlines rather than the usual topical headers. Keep in mind that it may be several days or even weeks after your proposal is read before a decision is made. So you need to take steps to highlight the key points that you want reviewers to remember.

**Don't dilute your proposal with too much text.** This is a common problem. Proposals in our industry are often two to three times longer than they should be. Providing more information than necessary doesn't strengthen your proposal; it weakens it. The additional volume makes it more likely that important content will get lost in the clutter. It's recommended that you *set aggressive page limits* for all sections of your proposal. This forces you to tighten your writing, as well as to make better use of figures, simple tables, and captioned photos—better ways to get your points across than detailed narratives.

## Two Chances to Shine

Review of hundreds of proposals reveals two common deficiencies. These present a great opportunity to set your proposal apart:

**Client focus.** Demonstrating a solid grasp of the client's needs, concerns, and desires, particularly reflected in your project



Put the client first in your proposal, rather than the typical focus on qualifications.

**Skimmability.** Making it easy for the client to review your proposal and discern its salient points. Reviewers skim, but rare is the proposal that makes this easy. This is a good way to stand out.

**Other design tips.** Following are a few more simple proposal design tips to consider:

- Arrange content in a logical step-by-step fashion, describing a work process or ordering points according to importance.
- Illustrate the work process with simple flow diagrams, described in associated text. You look smarter when you can draw a picture of it.
- Consider adding at least one graphic element (photo, table, figure) to each page. That breaks up text and makes skimming easier.
- Present most information in bullets, with bold summary statements followed by supporting text (like the format of this guide). Once again, this aids skimming.
- Keep tables and figures simple. Break it into more than one if necessary to follow this principle. Overly complicated tables and figures are counterproductive. They're supposed to make the communication easier, not more difficult.
- Prepare your tables and figures first, before writing the associated text. If you can draw a picture of it or summarize it in a simple table, you're well along the way to being able to describe it clearly in words.
- Always include captions with your pictures. This really strengthens the value of including photos in your proposal.

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