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## **Keys to Developing Successful Proposals by Businesses**

I've seen a lot of proposals submitted by businesses during my career as a contracting manager and now as a consultant. Some were very effective and communicated a clear message that directly responded to the Request for Proposals (RFP). They were easy to read and inspired confidence. Other proposals wandered across the landscape – a hapless collection of paper that read more like a corporate policy manual divorced from the project at hand.

### **Suggestions for Businesses**

I'd like to offer some suggestions for businesses responding to RFPs on how to craft an effective proposal that gets attention.

#### **Develop the Strategy**

When an RFP is issued, some businesses are tempted to jump right into the process of producing the proposal. The deadline is looming, so they start writing the proposal immediately without really knowing what they want to say. Or perhaps more commonly, they don't do much writing at all. Instead, they merely collect and collate pages from previous proposals, policy and procedure manuals, mission statements, forms, and websites – and top it off with a nice cover page and a binder – ready (or not ready!) to submit to the public agency. This approach results in a hodgepodge proposal without a strategic focus.

Good proposal development is not a random, trial-and-error process of slapping words onto paper. It should be strategic, deliberate, and laser-focused.

Before the first words of a new proposal are written, it is critical for a company to pause, take a deep breath, and step back the immediacy of the proposal deadline. Here are three strategic actions business should take once an RFP has been advertised.

1. **Read the RFP:** It seems like an obvious first step, but from some of the proposals I've read, I'm not sure those companies have looked at the RFP – or if they did, that they actually paid attention to what was asked for. RFPs reflect the values and objectives of public agencies, so reading the RFP carefully provides insights into what the agency cares about and their expectations. Pay close attention to the specific words used in the RFP – especially for the scope of work and evaluation criteria. These sections will give you a good sense of how closely your company's experiences match with what services the agency is seeking and how it will evaluate proposals.
2. **Assess Your Chance of Success:** Responding to an RFP will cost your company time, money, and focus. Be deliberate in assessing whether you actually have some chance of being awarded the contract. Gather your key management and project team to think strategically about the RFP before you decide whether to respond to it. Here are some questions that should be part of your decision making process:
  - a. **Project Fit:**
    - Does your company have experience performing this scope of work?
    - Is the scope of work a good fit for your company?
    - Is the work part of your core business?
    - Have you performed projects of this size and complexity before?
  - b. **Agency Fit:**
    - Have you worked for this agency or type of agency before?
    - If you haven't worked for the agency, do their decision makers know your company through contacts you've made with them or by reputation?
    - Are you prepared to deal with the administrative requirements of the agency?
  - c. **Staffing:**
    - What personnel would you assign to the project?
    - Does your staff have the right experience for this kind of work?
    - Are they available to work on the project within the project's schedule?
  - c. **Competition:**
    - Who are your likely competitors?
    - What are your company's strengths and weaknesses compared to your competitors?
    - What strategies can you use to compensate for your weaknesses?
    - Do any of your competitors have contracts or established relationships with the agency?

- c. Preparation Time:
  - How much time and effort will be involved in developing the proposal?
  - Do you have appropriate staff available to develop the proposal?
- 3. **Develop Your Message:** After you've decided to propose, but before you begin writing, think conceptually about the big picture. What unique message do you want to convey throughout your proposal about why your company is the right company for the project? This is an opportunity for you to not just mechanically respond to evaluation criteria in the RFP, but to proactively influence the evaluators.

### **Prepare Your Proposal**

Even if you've developed an effective strategy, a poorly executed proposal will reduce your chances of success. There are four areas where proposals often fall short: content, structure, writing, and layout. Let's look at some of the common mistakes in these areas and how you can make your proposal more effective.

1. **Tailored Content:** One of the most common weaknesses of proposals I review is they are generic, and very boring to read. They have the same content the company used in the last proposal – and will use in the next proposal. Agencies who read such proposals are not convinced that the proposer understands the scope of work, or has even read the RFP. Though it takes additional effort, companies that research a project and tailor the proposed solutions to the agency's specific needs generally score higher.

The same customized approach applies to the cover letter. A generic cover letter fails demonstrate that you know anything about or care about the agency's needs. Even if the agency's evaluators read nothing but your cover letter, they should still come away with a clear understanding of your strengths, your core message, and why you should be selected. That core message that you developed in your strategy sessions should then be embedded throughout your proposal.

Though you may be confident that you can perform the work of the project, you must actually demonstrate the relevance of your experience in your proposal. This requires you to take your experiences and translate them into language that makes sense for the scope of work required.

2. **Methodical Structure:** When agency evaluators review proposals, they usually have both the RFP evaluation criteria and your proposal opened up on their desk. You can make this review easier by responding in the same order as the evaluation criteria, repeating the evaluation criteria in your proposal, and making sure you address all of the specifics outlined in each criterion. This methodical

approach will help evaluators see that you are addressing what was requested – and will make sure you don't forget anything. If evaluators have to hunt through your proposal to find where you've addressed a topic, you may lose points.

RFPs often have many administrative requirements related to proposals. Pay attention to these details – things like not exceeding a certain number of pages in your proposal and making sure all forms have been completed and submitted.

3. **Clear Writing:** A poorly written proposal is ponderous to read, while a well-written proposal is a joy to peruse. Language should be crisp, clear, and concise – not corporate and unwieldy. Avoid long and complex sentences that are hard to keep track of, as well as wordy and dense paragraphs that are hard for the eye to follow. Use an active voice – it's more direct and easier to read. In other words, to say it in the non-preferred passive voice: "Active voice should be used, and passive voice should be avoided." Don't repeat your content in multiple places or say the same thing over and over in your proposals – or for that matter, don't be redundant! Check your spelling and grammar, and if you don't have a good technical writer on staff, hire one as an employee or on a contract basis.
4. **Pleasing Layout:** You should make it easy for the agency's evaluators to read your proposal and quickly understand your message. Photos, charts, and graphs can be used effectively to break up text and communicate information. Well described paragraph headings help readers follow the flow of your proposal. Use a well-organized table of contents and tabs (with the name of the section on the tab) to help readers maneuver the proposal. Color, shading, boxes, and other graphic design tools can further enhance the readability of your proposal. If you don't have a graphic designer on staff, consider hiring one as an employee or on a contract basis.

## Summary

What makes some proposals stand out while others fall to the bottom of the pile?

Development of your overall strategy and message is just as important as careful production of the content, structure, writing, and layout of a proposal. Though there are no guarantees, these keys can make your proposals more competitive and increase your company's chances of being awarded a contract.

## About Mike Purdy

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