

Writing Your Own Winning Proposal

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The first time a client asked me to write a proposal I panicked. I did not sleep nights struggling with how I could effectively convince my customer that I could deliver. If this sounds familiar continue reading.

One of the simplest definitions of a proposal was expressed by a participant in one of my proposal writing workshops at the TBDC (Toronto Business Development Centre). He said: **“A proposal is a tool to persuade the readers to act in favor of your ideas”**.

Writing a proposal is as much a technique as it is an art. As a Small & Medium Enterprise (SME) consultant, I have been exposed to many aspects of proposal writing and have spent a great deal of time attempting to understand the process and developing an effective technique. It seems, however, that the better I understand the process, the clearer it becomes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that works. This is probably due to the fact that each proposal has its own unique character and requires a creative approach that will appeal to the client's expectations. I believe, this is the reason that winning proposals will always require that artistic touch in addition to a solid methodology. In the next few paragraphs, I will share with you my techniques for proposal writing. I hope this article will offer new insights.

Proposals are most commonly used to persuade potential customers to purchase your products or services, to secure funding from foundations or corporate donors or simply to obtain the support of others for the implementation of particular programs. To develop a proposal writing methodology, you must first understand the proposal process, know your core competencies, identify the key players & influencing factors, develop a proposal template and establish an evaluation process. Once you have completed this exercise you must continuously refine your methodology by applying the lessons learned until you have perfected your own method of writing winning proposals.

Most Request For Proposal (RFP) documents provide only the basic information on the organization, the problem, and the type of solution sought. You must obtain as much additional information as possible – both obvious and not so obvious. The obvious includes things like organizational structure, finances, operational procedures, etc. The less than obvious addresses points like key stakeholders, the client's decision-making process, competitors, Government legislation, etc. Since every proposal offers a plan to fill a need, your client will evaluate your plan according to how well your proposal answers the following questions: **WHAT** are you proposing, **WHY** is it important to do it, **WHEN** do you plan to do it, **HOW MUCH** is it going to cost and **HOW** are you planning to do it. This means that you must develop an effective method of gathering requirements and placing them in the appropriate context. This will provide you with a clear insight into the unwritten requirements and allow you to propose solutions that “WOW” the clients.

The most basic composition of a proposal, as with any other written document, is simple. It needs a beginning (the Introduction), a middle (the Body of material to be presented) and an end (the Conclusion/Recommendation).

The INTRODUCTION presents and summarizes the problem you intend to solve and your solution to that problem (the **WHAT**). It also must include the benefits the clients/users will receive from the solution (the **WHY**) and the cost of that solution (the **HOW MUCH**).

The BODY of the proposal explains the complete details of the solution: **HOW** the job will be done; broken into separate tasks and/or phases, what method will be used to do it, including the equipment, material, and personnel that would be required; **WHEN** the work will begin; and, **WHEN** the job will be completed. It also presents a detailed cost breakdown for the entire job (**HOW MUCH**). This section must clearly define all deliverables in tangible terms.

The CONCLUSION emphasizes the benefits that the client will realize from your solution to the problem and urges the client to action. It should be encouraging, confident and assertive in tone.

My experience shows that the above basic framework needs to be augmented with additional items such as: the critical success factors; the degree of involvement required from your clients/user (Will they be members of your delivery team, of your steering group, or both); your company profile (including your mission statement); a partial list of similar assignments and the credentials of the proposed resources.

If you are dealing with a highly technical proposal, I strongly recommend you provide an executive summary written in non-technical language. You might include a glossary of terms that explains technical language used in the body of the proposal, and/or attach appendices that explain technical information in generally understood language.

Some RFPs describe in reasonable detail the proposal format to be submitted. Whenever this is not provided, I use the following guideline of a Table of Contents: *(The information inside the brackets indicates the positioning of the contents as it relates to the Introduction, Body and Conclusion sections of a proposal. The Client in this table of content is the Buyer and you are the Vendor)*

- Executive Summary.
- Introduction and Background on vendor-buyer relationships. *(Introduction)*
- The buyer's operating environment as seen by the vendor. *(Introduction)*
- Vendors understanding of the buyer's 'compulsory' and 'desirable' requirements. *(Introduction)*
- The opportunity for improvement. *(Body)*
- The proposed alternative to the current product or service. *(Body)*
- The deliverables. *(Body)*
- Costs of implementation. *(Body)*.
- Operational issues in implementing the solution. *(Body)*.
- The benefits of the suggested change – financial, manpower, service levels, quality, etc. *(Body)*.
- The future effects of the benefits on the buyer organization. *(Body)*.
- Alternatives considered – costs and other impacts. *(Body)*.
- Vendor experience in the relevant field. *(Conclusion)*
- References/endorsements of others who have adapted this solution. *(Conclusion)*.
- Appendices

These techniques are the building blocks of a proposal. A comprehensive proposal employs the art of presentation and the finesse of story telling. Thus the winning combination of technique and art!