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Making Your Proposal Come Out on Top

Selling may woo prospects, but customers are often won with proposals. Done right, proposals can be your best avenue to new business, funding, or opportunities. Done wrong, they are a waste of time and money. The key to increasing your winning percentage is bearing in mind the prospect's needs at all levels of the process. This rule applies as much to meeting the basic specs of the submission as it does to how skillfully you assess and respond to the prospect's needs. Ideally, this approach results in a concise, readable, and persuasive document.

Think of the proposal as a start of a relationship. When writing the proposal start establishing the relationship that can lead toward the selection of you.

The process of writing the proposal should be:

Thorough research. "Spend at least as much time in studying, analyzing, planning, researching, and otherwise preparing to write as in writing itself," writes Herman Holtz in *The Consultant's Guide to Proposal Writing*. Research, backed by a clear understanding of prospect requirements, enables you to develop strategies, solutions, staffing requirements, and even pricing.

Careful attention to writing. The proposal must clearly document an understanding of the problem, explain a solution, describe activities, and detail anticipated results. Revise the document again for clarity. Make sure you back up any statistics with case studies or third-party recognition.

Example:

Deployed properly Microsoft Dynamics GP can deliver payback in less than one year. – *Nucleus Research, May 2009*

Make a good Executive Summary. This is usually the only section read by the decision makers (and the final price on the proposal). Some recommend writing the executive summary last and keeping the length to 10% to 15% of the length of the proposal. Crucial elements of an executive summary include analysis, scope, recommendations, implementation highlights, and, most important, benefits.

Be concise. Keep your proposal as short as possible. As the expert, it is tempting to add everything that a prospect might be interested in, however it is important to stick to

what they asked for and are interested in. One distinct benefit: short proposals usually get read first, which makes yours the standard by which others are judged.

Remember that details sell. Try to avoid generalities such as “extensive experience”. What specifically makes your consultants stand out? Quantify their experience with number of implementations, number of years working on the product and special vertical markets they have experience in. Don’t just say you will provide a training manual. What kind of manual? We will provide a 100-page binder with module checklist and 10 questions at the end of each section to ensure understanding.

Too often, proposals are marketing afterthoughts, left to the last minute and filled with search-and-replace generalities. No wonder success rates suffer, and proposals get associated with uncertain return from extended effort. But well-written proposals can actually be your best sales tool—and the start of a long relationship.

Interested in learning more about proposal writing? Pick up this book, *The Consultant’s Guide to Proposal Writing: How to Satisfy Your Clients and Double Your Income* by Herman Holtz.