

How to Write Proposals that Win

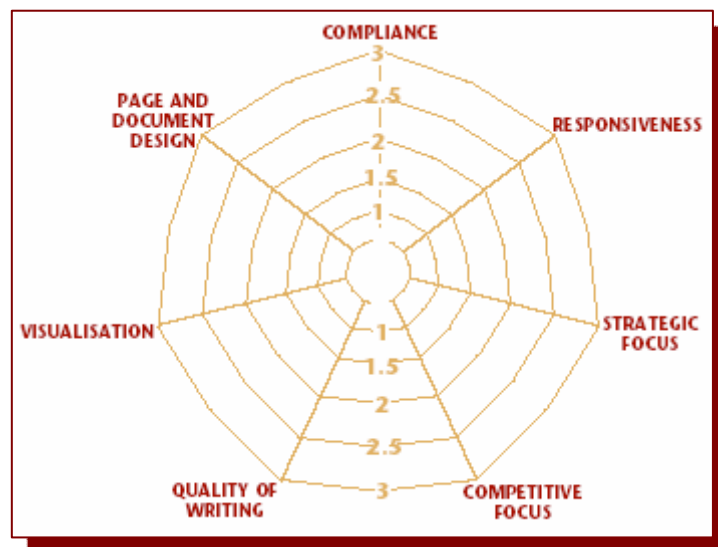


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Writing Winning Proposals – 21 Ways to Improve Your Proposals

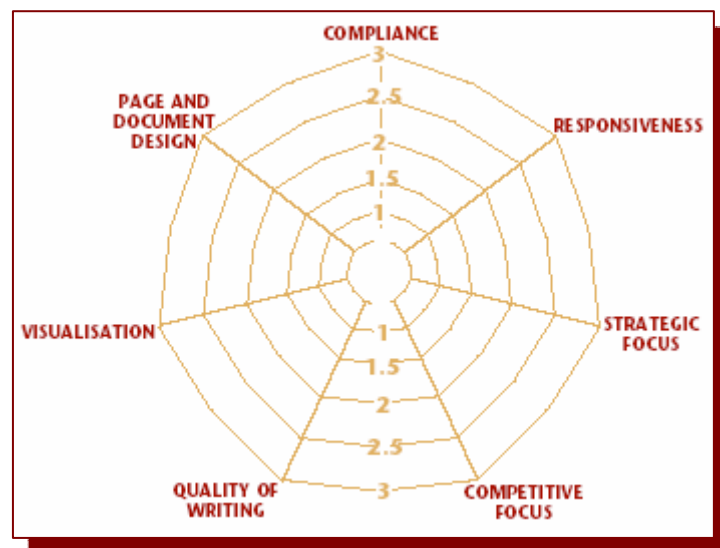
Organisations that implement the suggestions contained within this White Paper will win more business with their proposals.

The fundamental principles of writing good proposals are:

- **Align the structure of your proposal to the customer’s evaluation process.**
- **Use a disciplined, customer-focused writing approach.**
- **Use regular reviews to control and add value to the writing process.**

Writing Winning Proposals is not a “Black Art”, it is a Science that can be mastered by most organisations.

Over the last 20 years Shipley has evaluated proposals, on behalf of its clients, and identified the characteristics of proposals that consistently win business. These characteristics are shown in the following radar diagram. Proposals that score higher against these characteristics tend to win more business.



Winning proposals have characteristics that make them customer focused. *The purpose of a proposal is to provide the customer’s evaluators with reasons why they should select you and not your competition.*

This White Paper discusses these characteristics and provides suggestions as to how you can change your approach to writing proposals, to achieve greater customer focus and win more business.

Compliance

Compliance means strict adherence to the customer's request - both to the submittal instructions and to the customer's technical requirements.

Compliance with instructions means that you have followed the requested proposal format, page budget and answered all questions. Compliance with requirements means that you have agreed to meet all requirements as asked for in the request.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area. In your proposal:

1. Include a table which:-
 - Shows, at a glance, your level of technical compliance against the requirements.
 - Provides references to the detail of your proposal, which supports your claims of compliance.
 - Highlights areas where you are compliant.
 - Justifies and mitigates areas where you are not compliant.
2. Adopt the customer's numbering scheme, to make it easy for the customer to find the answers they need.
3. Take the time to identify and follow the customer's submittal requirements.

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to reject you then ignore their submittal instructions and/or be significantly non-compliant with their requirements.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness means understanding and responding to the underlying business issues behind the proposal request.

If "Compliance" is about answering the question, then "Responsiveness" is about knowing why the question was asked in the first place.

Demonstrating solutions to the customer's underlying business issues provides you with competitive advantage over those who may only be compliant to technical requirements.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area. In your proposal:

1. Include an Executive Summary that identifies the customer's business issues and provides a high-level description of how your solution will allow them to address their business issues.
2. Ensure that the customer's name is mentioned first and more often than yours and that the proposal is written around the customer's issues.
3. The majority of technical features of your solution are linked to business benefits for the customer.

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to reject you then ignore the business issues behind their proposal request.

Strategic Focus

Strategic Focus is about making it clear to the customer why you should be selected.

You achieve this primarily by emphasising specific strengths that relate directly to their request, demonstrating the benefits that your solution will bring to them and by discussing value, not price alone, particularly where you expect to be more expensive than a competitor.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area. In your proposal:

1. Include a value proposition, rather than a price alone.
2. Quote previous customers' references, about relevant past project successes, that substantiate your capability.
3. Include at least one paragraph on how you will manage the customer's risk, in the proposal's Executive Summary.

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to reject you then ignore one or more of these factors.

Competitive Focus

Competitive Focus is about raising concerns in the customer's mind about the dangers of selecting one of your competitors.

You achieve this primarily by "ghosting" your competitors, making it clear to the customer where they should be looking to find the weaknesses in a competitor's approach.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area. In your proposal:

1. Without naming any competitor, outline a competitor's likely solution approach and explain to the customer why you did not choose that solution approach yourself.
2. Without naming any competitor, downplay the benefits to the customer of a likely competitor approach, particularly one that is directly connected to one or more of the customer key business drivers.
3. Without naming any competitor, highlight differences between you and your competition to the customer, in areas that matter to the customer.

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to reject you then ignore potentially strong competition and allow them to "ghost" you.

Succinct & Structured Writing

Succinct & Structured Writing is about having a sales message and stating it clearly in a grammatically correct way.

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to reject you, make your proposal as convoluted and as difficult to read as possible.

Don't let the customer be the first person to proof read your proposal. Poor standards of grammar and spelling will tell the customer something about your organisation's attention to detail.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area:

1. Carefully proof-read the first few pages of your proposal. If you find any spelling or grammatical mistakes, make sure that the whole document is proof-read, by someone who has not been involved in its creation, before it goes out.
2. Count the number of words in 5 randomly selected paragraphs. If the average paragraph length is more than 50 words, consider revising the proposal to reduce the average paragraph sizes.
3. Ensure that your proposal does not contain any unnecessary jargon and that only "Industry-standard" terms are used.

Visualisation

Visualisation is about using appropriate graphics, photographs, tables and diagrams, to add visual appeal to your proposal.

Visuals are also used to help you convey key messages.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area:

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to get bored, when reading your proposal, don't include any visuals.

1. Think about creating/using visuals before writing the text. Aim to include an average of 2 visuals in every 3 pages of the proposal document.
2. Ensure that most of the visuals in your proposal have supporting captions.
3. Ensure that the visuals you use are understandable within 10 seconds and that the reasons for their inclusion are obvious.

Document Design

Document Design is about organising the proposal such that key messages can be found easily and understood.

Most customers will not read a proposal cover to cover. Instead they will look for the answers to their questions and reference to their business issues.

There are three key things that you can do to make your proposals better in this area:

If you want to give the customer a simple reason to reject you, then make your proposal as difficult to navigate as possible and hide your key information inside long paragraphs.

1. Your proposal layout has a wide margin with “call-outs” and frequent headings. One consistent technique is used to highlight important text, such as colour, bold fonts or the use of surrounding “white space”. (The text to the left of this information is a “call-out”).
2. Use “informative headings”, which summarise for the reader the information they will find in the following paragraph, throughout the proposal.
3. Look at your proposal (having addressed all of the above questions) and ask yourself “*Would I expect the customer to pick up this proposal again, willingly?*”

Words of Caution

If you follow these suggestions, you will write more winning proposals.

However, it is important to keep in mind that:

- A high quality proposal will confirm your understanding of the customer’s issues and present your matching solution in a professional manner.
- A poor quality proposal reflects badly on your organisation, undermines your sales activities and can let a competitor win business that you were well positioned to win.

If You Would Like to Know More

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