

# What Wins Work

## What Wins Work?

### How to Write Successful Project Proposals

by Brian Lines, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Kansas

#### Low-Bid Procurement

When contractors simply had to “sharpen their pencil” to win work, they knew where they stood. In a simpler world, the contractor who could do the job for the lowest price was awarded the contract. Contractors were considered equal, so the lowest-bidder was the firm for the job. Over time, however, owners experienced the grim reality that all contractors were not, in fact, created equal. Some produced higher quality work than others and often the “low bidder” turned out to be the “least efficient producer”. The “low-bidder” would often bring jobs in over budget, rife with change orders, failed quality inspections, costly delays, and undetected flaws that required costly correction over the expected life of the project. This experience soon taught owners to distinguish *total cost* from *initial cost* and best-value procurement methods began to rapidly replace the traditional low-bid method.

#### Best-Value Procurement

With sophisticated clients focusing less on lowest initial cost, it is important for contractors (who may be most familiar with low-bid procurement methods) to understand how to be effective when preparing non-price proposal submissions. If not the lowest price, what are owner’s looking for? On what basis are we being evaluated if not on initial cost? Is it all reputation now? How do we write proposals that will win us the work? Should we just brag about how much successful work we have completed? How about references? Do potential clients just want to hear what past owners have to say?

#### 7 Deadly Sins of Proposal Writing

Our analysis of 71 contractor proposals containing both successful and unsuccessful bids revealed that procurement committees did not respond well to the *cut and paste*

marketing language that contractors used in their proposals. Our research uncovered the seven deadly phrases that contractors would *cut and paste* from one proposal to another:

1. *"We will work with the Client to..."* or *"We will meet with the Client to..."* or *"We will collaborate with the Client to..."*
2. *"We have XX years of experience..."*
3. *"We use the best pre-qualified list of subs, suppliers, and manufacturers..."*
4. *"We are highly experienced in"...* (insert current industry buzzword, i.e. Lean, JIT, BIM, LEED, sustainability, etc.)
5. *"Our company values are..."* (insert company mission statement, i.e. *"We use a Total Team Approach<sup>TM</sup>"*)
6. *"Our people are our greatest asset..."*
7. *"Safety is our #1 priority..."*

## AVOID THESE SEVEN PHRASES AT ALL COST

### What Wins Work?

The secret ingredient for writing successful proposals in a non-low-bid proposal environment is – ***differentiation***. Owners gave high scores to proposals that differentiated the contractor's unique qualifications for delivering quality to their specific project. Owners responded favorably to proposals that:

1 – Focus on explaining how the contractor will approach their project in actionable, step-by-step terms including:

- Highlights of project-specific information.
- Step-by-step action plans that address explicit aspects of the project scope.
- Thorough discussion of contractor-controlled items.

2 – Offer alternate proposals that provide a comprehensive review of potential scope options to enhance the project and ensure the associated cost and schedule impacts are clearly defined. Owners value discussion of how the challenges and complexities of construction operations would be managed if the contractor were to be awarded the project.

- Discuss project management items of concern to the owner.
- Recommend actionable approaches, mitigation plans, and resolution strategies.

3 -Identify design-related risks (AND SOLUTIONS) in order to stand out to evaluators and show your in-depth understanding of the construction operations that are needed to

actually build the design.

- Don't be afraid to Identify design-related risk elements that could potentially impact project cost and schedule.
- Do not focus on cost-savings. To the contrary, proposing scope alternatives that were cost-additive received higher evaluation scores. This may sound counterintuitive, but the reality is that more sophisticated clients are less focused on lowest-initial cost. Instead, they are interested in life-cycle costs and view construction as a service experience that comes as a value proposition for project quality.

## Summary

New non-low-bid proposals are more successful when contractors focus on explaining their expertise in actionable, step-by-step terms. Also, identifying design-related risks (AND SOLUTIONS) stands out to evaluators and shows that the contractor has in-depth understanding of the construction operations. Successful proposals highlight project-specific information. In other words, successful proposals always pass the *"copy-and-paste"* test – if the content can be copied from one proposal to the next, then it is NOT specific enough to stand out to a Client's evaluation team. And believe it or not, our research shows that successful proposals provide options and scope alternates – even when these options are cost-additive.

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