

3 Common Proposal Mistakes to Avoid at All Cost

By Dianna Booher

"We write proposals, but we don't want them to *look* like proposals—we want them to sound like informational, technical reports," a client told me. Although I didn't go into a philosophical discussion with him, I filed the remark away as a basic misconception about proposals.

Whether your proposal is a single-page sales letter, a formal 2,000-page document, or an email with only prices and specifications, it's usually not the *form* of a proposal but its *substance* that brings rejection. Avoid these three common proposal mistakes to seal your next deal.

No Strategy

The most important feature of your proposal should be your theme or strategy, which is repeated and developed throughout the document. Why should the bidder select *your* organization over all the rest? Do you have the best design? Do you have the most thoroughly trained technicians? Do you have the most up-to-date equipment or information? Can you do the project most inexpensively? Can you do it more quickly than the competition? Give your reader one or two basic overriding themes to capsule your capabilities. Avoid saying simply, "Well, so can we!"

Vagueness

Proposal writers often fear that they will give away too much information in outlining their approaches and solutions to problems. There is, of course, always the danger of having a prospective buyer read your proposal and attempt to implement your solution without your help. But the bigger fear should be of giving so little detail that the reader doesn't think you know how to do the job.

One often vague section in proposals is the list of references. Name contacts and provide addresses and phone numbers.

Closely related to vagueness about references is evasiveness about the background and experience of the proposed project staff: "have graduate degrees in related areas," "has had ten years' experience in the industry," "has handled similar projects both nationally and internationally." Readers often interpret such comments thus: "Nothing to brag about, huh?"

Answers to the Wrong Problems

Study the client's request for proposal (RFP). Propose to do what the prospective buyer wants. Notice that we didn't say you should necessarily propose to do what the buyer says he or she wants—make sure you investigate those stated needs or wants. What an RFP says and what can be gleaned from a discussion with the buyer may be vastly different.

Many, including us, have learned this truth the hard way. A few years back, we received a request to propose a training program, a request that already included within it a detailed course outline. Because there were several places where we considered improvements could be made to the outline, we called the prospective client and asked if the topics were firmly set. "Oh, yes. That's exactly what we want. All our VP's and technical experts have signed off on that course outline."

Therefore, we developed our proposal along those lines, only to have the proposal rejected. The client's explanation: "The winning proposer completely scrapped our course outline. What his company presented makes a lot more sense, and we're really excited about the changes."

You perhaps will discover the differences between stated needs and criteria and the real needs only by flushing out and investigating discrepancies. Give clients what they need, but be sure to

find out what the *real* needs are. Trying to discover the real needs is especially important if you are providing products or services that the prospective client may not understand as fully as you do.

To be used as an effective sales tool, a proposal must incorporate a strategy, address the reader's needs, and then persuasively present the solution and capabilities. Do these well and hit the mark every time.

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*For more on writing winning proposals, see **E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication** (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.*