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This issue of the BSC Advisor lists 6 DON'Ts and 8 DOs to show (prospective) customers you understand and value their business – and time. Avoid self-inflicting wounds that customers notice: things that show a proposal is “cookie cutter.” Yes, cut n’ paste may be quicker, but not better if you don’t win the business.

Self-Inflicted Proposal Wounds – IT SHOWS

Sales reps can work long and hard, sometimes years, to get on customers’ bid lists. Yet when the Request for Proposal (RFP) finally arrives, reps submit proposals that cripple their chances to win the bid.

What’s with that?

Is it because sales reps:

- Don’t have the time to properly respond?
- Don’t understand their customers’ needs?
- Aren’t aware of how RFPs are evaluated?
- Don’t believe proposals determine supplier selection?
- Expect new business to come to them because of who they are?
- Haven’t committed money, time & effort to proposal writing?
- Don’t know how often they win or lose because they don’t track their win ratio?



The answer is some, or all of the above.

Here are 6 DON'Ts and 8 DOs to help sales reps show better in their responses to RFPs. Obviously this list doesn’t cover everything, but what list does?

Here goes...



DON'T do these 6 Things, or you'll Hurt your Chances to Win Bids



DON'T make proposals based on volume

Too many pages. Too long of a response. **This is one of the worst signals sales reps send to customers**, because customers think:

- I don't have time to read all that
- It's mostly filler
- That seller doesn't know what's important to me
- That seller didn't care enough to find out what's important to me
- That seller thinks they can pull one over on me
- Where's the price page?

IT SHOWS!



DON'T answer an RFP question with only "see previous response"

"See previous response" is a very wrong answer. It quickly gets customers against you because it communicates:

- a) you think the customer is sloppy, lazy or dumb to repeat questions
- b) you are sloppy, lazy or dumb because you didn't think of a response

Sometimes an RFP question will seem redundant, but customers are seeking different information from different questions, even though some look like twins.

IT SHOWS!



Search for that difference – take your "best guess" and add text "Similar to what we've proposed in RFP question 5.2.3, here we plan to... <enter the different angle or info>"



3

DON'T provide a jigsaw puzzle as a solution

Customers don't have the time or understanding to make sense of a complicated solution.

For example, think about how you answer technology related questions – that's an area where most sellers have cobbled together many different parts of software, hardware, and subcontractors.

Don't expect customers to remember any of it.

It's the sales rep's job to simplify a solution to the extent it can be easily communicated. Yes, you must provide enough detail to differentiate yours from the competition, but not so much as to lose your customers' attention and retention.

Jigsaw puzzles look like what they are.

IT SHOWS!



4

DON'T write “to be determined” as your sole response to a question

If in response to an RFP question you answer “to be determined”, or “requires more customer input” and leave it at that, you're sunk.

Customers know their final design requires more input.

They're asking you for initial thoughts, considerations, caveats, things to accomplish or watch out for.

But if all a sales rep responds with is “to be determined”, customers see them as:

- a) contentious
- b) adversarial
- c) not smart enough
- d) lazy
- e) all the above

IT SHOWS!





5 **DON'T** make grandiose, generalized statements about your company

Don't start answering an RFP question with:

“As the world leader in specialized flapjack flipping, XYZ Company will...(you finally get around to whatever the question had asked for)”

Do you really think you're building up credibility with customers? This is the most **obvious, self-serving congratulations that actually turns your customers/readers against you.** It pushes their BS reader off the charts.

IT SHOWS!



Answer the question immediately and directly in your written response – if you must, use your cover letter or executive summary to pose yourself peacock-like.

6 **DON'T** assume customers select you in spite of your proposal

If it's an RFP process, **customers are required to judge you on what you've presented in your proposal.** Procurement requires them to justify their selection within their company.

It doesn't matter if those same customers know you have all sorts of cool technology or advanced processes.

It's only what's in the proposal that counts.

IT SHOWS!





8 Things to DO To Avoid Self-Inflicted Proposal Wounds



1 DO the thinking work

It may be hard for sales reps to believe customers can tell the difference between cut-and-paste/brochure-text and a unique solution to their needs, but they can.

Do the thinking work first; analyze customers' situations and needs, then design custom solutions. You are the experts, aren't you?

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A custom solution is not what you're doing for everyone else – though some processes and products may be similar to other customers – they're never the same – **viva la difference!**

2 DO write concisely & clearly

Customers don't have time to wade through 100s of pages of bloated, disjointed regurgitation.

Q: When do customers get a chance to block out 5 days to read proposal responses?

A: Unless they read your proposal on their vacation, probably never.

They're grabbing time to evaluate all sellers' responses in the midst of busy, hectic days.

Less is more...as long as the less is dense information. Write, then edit down to the bare essentials. Then trust your customers. They'll have a better chance of understanding and remembering your responses when they're to the point.

IT SHOWS!



unclear



3

DO paint a picture of your solution

If you do #1 and #2 you'll be able to tell your story – in your responses to individual RFP questions – so customers choose you over the competition.

Respond by describing your solution in place at the customer's site, and it's working to perfection. Be specific, clear and concise. When customers can see it as a whole solution, specifically designed for them – they'll get it, and they'll get you.

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Pet shop owners have customers hold the puppy to help them make up their minds. **Give your customers a puppy to hold (your custom solution) then they'll be more inclined to buy it/you.**

4

DO backup your claims

If you make a claim, such as “My Company is the leader in the blah blah industry,” or “Our employees are our greatest asset” provide evidence.

Point to the source. Outside sources are better than your own. The more easily recognized by customers the better, i.e. JD Powers.

Wherever possible, quantify the claim and place it in context. It's not enough to say “employee retention is 80%”, include “it's risen each of the last 5 years at a compound rate of 14%”.

Make claims, but give proof.

IT SHOWS!



Consider this question – if you had to attribute every claim you made to some outside source, how many would you make, and which ones?





5 **DO** provide mockups and/or blind examples of reports

This is part of having customers hold the puppy before they buy it/you. Many sales reps don't do this, and for the ones that do...

IT SHOWS!



6 **DO** get formatting right

Until your proposal can be wired telepathically into customers' minds, they have to read a document.

Pay attention to how your document ends up, as poorly formatted documents lose readers. A concise, easy to follow and navigate document is easier for customers to read, comprehend, and then buy your solution.

Get Microsoft Word training for your proposal production staff so they can really do it right – not just get it out the door.

IT SHOWS!





7 DO make responses reader friendly

Break up long paragraphs of text into easily skimmed information. Use multiple heading levels, indentation, bullets, tables, charts and graphics, etc.

Time-pressed customers skim your response at about 700 words per minute, but with only 50% comprehension (compared to normal reading of 200 wpm and close to 100% comprehension).

Make content easier to read and customers will read your RFP if it's reader friendly.

IT SHOWS!

8 DO respect customers' time

In all materials submitted, consider customers' available time to read and digest responses. They're not just reading yours, but all bid responses. Design, write, and format with that in mind.

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Pro-Link, Inc.

500 Chapman Street
Canton, MA 02021

T: 800-74-LINKS

F: 781-828-9551

W: www.prolinkhq.com

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