

Chapter 16

“Send Me a Proposal”

Create Proposals That Win

I believe you should write a proposal after the client has decided to go ahead with the project.

—JEFF THULL¹

Two bulky boxes land on the mailroom floor with a thud. The client cuts open the first box to find seven, five-inch binders bursting with a consultant's proposal. Sighing, he rips into the second box, resigned to finding more of the same. Instead, peering into the box, he spies several pieces of laminated wood and a plastic bag containing screws and bolts. The packet also includes the assembly instructions for the specially designed bookcase that the consultant thoughtfully provided for storing the voluminous proposal.

Sometimes it takes a bookcase full of binders to hold a proposal that meets a client's requirements; in other instances, a one-page e-mail will suffice. Whatever its dimensions, the consulting proposal is a powerful, yet misused marketing tool that often moves the selling process backward, instead of forward.

A great proposal can be a decisive factor in winning a project but it will not, by itself, secure the job for you. On the other hand, a poorly produced proposal can instantly unravel all the hard work you've done to persuade the client that you are the right choice for the job.

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: DON'T SHOOT YOURSELF IN THE FOOT

A well-crafted proposal can be the clincher that seals the deal, but a poorly written proposal can easily erase inroads you've made with the client and send the award to your competitor. Poor proposals may be nonresponsive to clients' needs, unclear, riddled with errors, filled with boilerplate, or late. Therefore, the first rule of proposals is: *Don't shoot yourself in the foot*. Make sure your proposal is clear, responsive, and on time.

The words, “Send me a proposal” are music to many consultants' ears. Even though they might not enjoy writing proposals, most consultants jump at the chance because they believe that exciting, lucrative work might be right around the corner. The invitation to write a proposal is a milestone in the sales cycle—an opportunity to get one step closer to a client and a new project.

Writing a proposal is a high-cost undertaking. It diverts time and attention from your other clients and takes intensive effort. You should think of a proposal as the culminating product of the discovery sequence described in Chapter 15. Follow a systematic process to write proposals to ensure that they are top quality and will give you a high probability of obtaining the work.

■ THE REALITIES OF PROPOSAL WRITING

A few clients will hire consultants, sight unseen, bypassing the usual proposal and selling rituals. Some clients still start projects on a handshake, though that's becoming as rare as an unlimited consulting budget. Such informal arrangements are the exception to the rule, so pay attention to the following realities:

- *Clients reject boilerplate:* Include some standard language in your contract terms and conditions and in the description of your firm, but dump boilerplate whenever you're describing the results the client will achieve, the people you'll assign to the project, and your approach to working with the client. If you don't have a result clearly specified in your proposal, it's a loser.
- *Clients buy on emotion and justify on fact:* They make a series of emotional decisions about which group of consultants to

hire. For many executives, it's about the gut feel they get once they've met the team. Your proposal provides the facts to back up the client's initial reactions. The foundation of this emotional response is developed during the discovery process, which takes place long before a single word is written in the proposal.

► *Clients expect proposals of increasingly higher quality:* Firms of all sizes now have access to the technology needed to create sophisticated proposals. Consultants are creating client-specific Web sites for proposals and delivering proposals in whatever way clients desire. To determine your capabilities, clients ask for greater disclosure of your ideas and approaches early in the proposal process instead of waiting until the project begins. Be sure your proposal delivery methods (paper, Web-based, CD, or other forms) meet professional standards.

► *A proposal is a simple document to define, but a complex one to create:* A proposal is intended to *help* you sell what you have to offer, whether it's a service, a product, or both. Your proposal is an extension of your overall sales process, not a lifeless recitation of your qualifications. It's often very difficult to describe the complexities of a project in an understandable way, but a proposal must summarize precisely the results you'll provide, over what time, and at what cost. That may sound simple, but it never is.

► *Time isn't your friend during the proposal process:* Given the resources you'll apply and divert to a proposal effort, you'll want as short a sales cycle as possible. As the selection process lengthens, your investment in business development grows. You'll have additional follow-up, travel expenses, and requests for more information. Also, as the sales cycle lengthens, the scope and objectives of projects tend to shift. It's essential that consultants stay very close to the decision makers to ensure that any project changes are included in their proposals.

► *The proposal process is a collaborative endeavor:* Most projects are complex; and results are often influenced by internal politics, the client's culture, or other factors that outsiders can't always anticipate or understand. To minimize potential snags, enlist the client's participation in all aspects of the proposal process: planning, research, preparation, editing, reviewing, and delivery. Use the client as a source of information and as a sounding board. Obtain the client's input, perspective, and agreement on all the major points you propose—project objectives, scope, approach, benefits, and fees.

► *When clients receive proposals, they don't like surprises:* As the proposal process unfolds, clients are always pulled in different

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: PROPOSALS FOR EXISTING CLIENTS

Writing proposals for existing clients can be more demanding than writing them for prospects. Existing clients expect more because they think that you understand their operation, culture, people, and problems better than competing firms. They believe that you should be able to handle their projects more quickly, inexpensively, and insightfully, and will examine your proposal with a more critical and demanding eye. Existing clients will expect your proposal to be results oriented, without the marketing fluff they see in many other proposals.

directions, and the project may change from the time proposals were requested to the submission deadline. Therefore, it's crucial to stay in close communication with the client to keep your proposal on track and strengthen your relationship. If you are awarded the project, the information you gained and the relationship you built via collaboration will prove invaluable.

➤ *They're going to look at price first.* Even if you believe the project is presold through the discovery process, you must be sure that the decision makers know, in advance, the estimate of project fees and how you arrived at that estimate. Don't present a fee or range of fees that makes clients' jaws drop. This is where the meetings before the meetings come in. It's vital to discuss the estimated fees with selection committee members in advance to avoid sticker shock when the proposal arrives.

■ THE IDEAL PROPOSAL

The best proposal is one you don't have to write. Tip the competitive scales in your favor and try to eliminate the proposal process altogether. A competitive field reduces the odds of landing the business, so sidestep that challenge if possible.

It's less costly for you to write a letter *confirming* your services than to prepare a formal document *proposing* your services. Consultants rarely ask clients to award them the business without a formal proposal, so distinguish yourself and ask if you can start the work using a letter of confirmation. What do you have to lose?

A confirmation letter differs from a proposal in that it describes specifically what you will do, not what you are proposing to do. The confirmation letter will describe the objective, scope, schedule, fees,

and results. But since it's not subject to competitive bidding, many other elements of a proposal may not be needed, such as a long list of qualifications, case studies, and detailed descriptions of your firm. Most importantly, the confirmation letter approach ends the sales cycle in your favor:

- ▶ Explain to clients why they also benefit from skipping the competitive proposal process.
- ▶ Point out that the consultant selection process takes their time and attention away from their business.
- ▶ Stress that you have the skills to get the job done, and that the lengthier the proposal process is, the more it costs them and the longer it delays the resolution of their problems.

In one case, a client asked a consultant how to improve communication between the client's engineering and manufacturing departments. The client intended to ask three other firms the same question and then solicit proposals.

Armed only with a white board and a marker, the first consultant led a three-hour discussion with the client team that dug out the real problem between the two groups, worked through a potential plan for creating the results the client needed, and proposed a schedule.

At the end of the meeting, the consultant asked for 24 hours to solidify the work of the group and prepare a letter confirming the work. The client agreed and awarded the work to the consultant the next day without a competitive bidding process.

If consultants have done their homework in qualifying the project and the client, a request to confirm the project should seem natural. You have nothing to lose in showing the client exactly what you can do and then asking for the work. Worst case, the client will say no.

■ WORDS TO AVOID IN PROPOSALS

Aside from failing to properly qualify a project during discovery, nothing ruins your chances of winning a project more than a jargon-laden proposal. Proposals brimming with consultant-speak drive clients to the competition faster than you can say "paradigm shift."

Scrutinize every word in a proposal and strip out empty phrases like "seamless connectivity," "strategic convergence," or "we deliver unparalleled solutions that create leverage for the enterprise." In the war of words, your most potent weapon is your computer's delete key.

■ THREE AILMENTS THAT CAN INFECT YOUR PROPOSAL

Consulting proposals suffer from one or more of three ailments that will drive clients into the waiting arms of your competitors—tired superlatives, buzzwords, and the plague of pronouns.

Superlatives are like weeds in a lawn: Unless checked, they tend to take over. Avoid prose such as “Our unsurpassed commitment to client service ensures your needs will be our highest priority.” Does that mean the needs of other clients are a lower priority for the firm?

Consultants hope to get an edge by claiming to be the fastest, best, or most experienced in the field. Clients routinely ignore such claims as unproven hype. Unless you can quantify your claims beyond a doubt, strip superlatives from your proposal. Make each claim relevant to the client’s issues and back it up with facts, figures, and testimonials. Without substantiation, clients will discount your claims and your proposal.

Instead of promising an “optimal solution for reducing customer complaints,” say, “We will reduce customer complaints by 9 percent in 90 days.” Then amplify in the proposal exactly how you will achieve that reduction.

Since proposals are often used to justify unspoken decisions made earlier in the sales process, include in your proposal facts that

GUERRILLA TACTIC: TIRED SUPERLATIVES TO DELETE OR JUSTIFY IN EVERY PROPOSAL

Most	Superior
Best	Maximum
Optimal	Minimum
Fastest	Unsurpassed
Shortest	Unrivaled
Easiest	Highest
Least	Unique

Nothing is intrinsically wrong with any of the preceding words, and we all use them in spoken and written communication (for example, “This is the fastest way to do that.”). But in proposals, they are suspect, and you should use them sparingly, if at all.

validate your supporters' desire to hire you. Give them powerful ammunition to advance your firm's candidacy and convince others in the organization. Help them effectively sell you and your proposal.

► **Ban Buzzwords**

Every organization has its own set of insider buzzwords. In initial meetings with clients, parts of the conversation may go right over your head because of the shorthand they use to communicate.

When it comes to the use of mind-numbing buzzwords, consultants are among the worst offenders. When readers have to struggle through a muddy proposal, they become frustrated and may discard it.

Like tired superlatives, buzzwords sap strength from proposals and make them hackneyed, trite, and insincere—the exact opposite of how a good proposal should read. Drop the consultant-speak and replace it with words, terms, and phrases that clients instantly understand and can relate to. So many proposals are full of tech-speak that when one comes along that is clear and concise, readers will respond favorably.

The following typical statements were found in actual consulting proposals. Notice that they don't tell the reader anything of substance about what the consultants are proposing to do:

- Our seamless and integrated solution drives optimal business advantage far in excess of your investment.
- We deploy a cross-platform infrastructure that transforms mission-critical applications for maximum connectivity.
- Our value chain consultants enable clients to operationalize their strategies for the extended enterprise.

BUZZWORD HALL OF SHAME

<i>If Your Proposal Says . . .</i>	<i>Consider Using This Instead</i>
Deliverables	Results
Enterprise-wide	Company
Human capital	People
Infrastructure	Foundation
Knowledge transfer	Inform
Thought-ware	Idea
Transformation	Change

Some consultants may understand these sentences, but it would be difficult for anyone else to translate this gibberish, unless of course the client reading it is a former consultant, who would likely get a good laugh.

If any words in the Consultants’ Buzzword Hall of Shame appear in your proposal, replace them with more descriptive alternatives. If you cannot avoid using a buzzword, make sure that it’s well defined, appropriate, and does not conceal an otherwise good idea.

➤ **Words to Dump from Every Proposal**

Reread your most recent proposal to see if it passes the buzzword test. The following words and phrases are so overused or meaningless that they should be banned from proposals. Eliminate them and say what you mean in plain English:

Best-in-class	Enterprise-wide	Ramp up
Best-of-breed	Frictionless	Real-world (<i>fill in</i>)
Best practice	Granular	Repurpose
Bleeding edge	Holistic	Scalable
Capability transfer	Human capital	Seamless
Change agent	Infrastructure	Synergy
Connectivity	Knowledge-based	Thought-ware
Convergence	Knowledge transfer	Time box
Cross-platform	Leading edge	Transformation
Cutting edge	Leverage	Value-added
Deliverables	Mission-critical	Value chain
Ecosystem	Offload	Win-win
Empower	Paradigm	World-class (<i>fill in</i>)
Enabler		

➤ **Plague of the Pronouns**

In the executive summary of one proposal, the pronoun “we” was used eight times in just six sentences. The client’s desired result was barely mentioned. It’s tempting to refer to yourself or your firm in a proposal with the royal “we”: “We are uniquely qualified to complete the assignment.” But these self-references are a trap that snares many consultants. Clients want your proposal to address *their* problems and the benefits they will receive, not to describe how great you are.

An accurate indicator that a proposal is straying too far from what the client needs is the frequent appearance of pronouns such as *us*, *we*, *our*, *me*, *my*, and *I*. Minimize your use of these pronouns and talk

about your client's issues. Save the self-congratulatory stuff for the qualifications section of your proposal, where clients fully expect a hefty dose of self-promotion.

Although you can't always avoid first-person pronouns, use them judiciously and try to find alternatives such as individual or firm names, or rephrase the sentence.

■ CONSULTING ISN'T ROCKET SCIENCE

Scientists are notorious for using terminology and acronyms the rest of us stumble over. Sometimes when they clarify, that just makes it worse. That's okay, though, because it's not their job to communicate.

Don't make your clients ask more than once what something means. It will work to your advantage to strip buzzwords, excessive pronouns, and meaningless phrases from your proposals. After working hard to understand the client's needs, don't throw away your gains because of unclear language. Make your proposal one that advances your case to win the work.

■ BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Writing a proposal can deplete your resources. So carefully assess each opportunity before you undertake the process. It costs clients nothing to request proposals, and they can obtain substantial information without having to make a commitment. You, on the other hand, must make significant investments to prepare and write proposals.

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: WHY DO THEY WANT A PROPOSAL?

Soliciting proposals allows clients to dip their toes in the waters and test what's available. Most companies want to see if consultants can solve problems that have stymied them. Some clients may feel that the impact of changes to their operation will be less severe if implemented by outsiders. Many companies request proposals solely to obtain price comparisons among consultants. Or they may begin the process with certain consultants in mind, perhaps incumbents that they want to keep on their toes. Nothing makes incumbents sharpen their pencils faster than competitive bids.

For many companies, hiring an outsider is a big step. It carries risks, and the costs can be steep. Review the types of buyer described in Chapter 15. Determine which type of buyer you’re dealing with and try to understand the reasons for the RFP before you jump in.

Before you begin to write, consider these issues:

- *Examine the situation in which you've been invited to compete.* Don't agree to write a proposal until you thoroughly understand the client's needs and have figured out how to best address those needs.
- *Define at a high level your ongoing sales strategy.* Given the information you have, how will you use your resources to complete the proposal *and* get the work?
- *Find the root cause of the issue facing the client.* Often, the stated problem merely reflects symptoms, not the problem itself. Consider other areas that may be contributing factors but are not recognized as such by the client.

GUERRILLA TACTIC: KEEP IT SHORT

Keep your proposal as short as possible. A study by The Sant Corporation showed that when proposals are piled on a table, people pick up the smallest one first.* Recipients also tend to resent having to read through proposals that are stuffed with unnecessary information. Remember, you'll be competing with other consultants, and one of the factors on which you'll be judged is efficiency.

If your document is running long or you must elaborate on a particular point, submit two documents: your proposal and a separate appendix. This will keep your proposal short and reader friendly.

*The study result about proposals is from the interview with Tom Sant, “This Month's Featured MasterMind: Tom Sant on Creating Winning Proposals,” *Management Consulting News* (April 1, 2003). Available from http://www.managementconsultingnews.com/newsletter_april_03.htm.

The Sant Corporation conducted tests with a group of people who make their living evaluating proposals. Sant said, “We gave them three proposals, one 25 pages, one 50, and one 100 pages long. We asked them to look for certain things, but we didn't really care about that. Typical psychological experiment—we just wanted to see which one they would pick up first. Almost without exception, they picked up the shortest one first because they wanted to get one out of the way quickly.”

■ WHAT EVERY PROPOSAL MUST INCLUDE

Clients often want proposal content arranged in a specific order, and timing and scope differ from project to project. So, most proposals must be written from scratch. Every proposal request is different. For example, a pharmaceutical company had a problem to solve—fast. The clients were searching for a way to manage their inventory. The project manager called three firms and asked for a one-page proposal to be submitted the next day. The proposals were to describe tasks, results, fees, and resources the clients would have to dedicate to the project.

A manufacturer hoping to improve labor productivity throughout its network of manufacturing plants issued an 82-page RFP that included seven pages of precise instructions for completion of the document. The RFP also included predefined computer spreadsheets that consultants were to complete and submit with their proposals. Any deviation from the stated instructions was cause for immediate disqualification.

No matter what kind of proposal you're writing, you'll need an organizing framework to get the job done. Whether it's 2 or 200 pages, you'll find yourself using most, if not all, of the following proposal categories.

► **Executive Summary**

The most important part of the proposal is this section, which everyone will read—especially decision makers. The executive summary demonstrates your understanding of the issues and succinctly describes the results the client can expect. The summary is not the place to focus on technical descriptions of your approach and methods, but you may describe your strategy and differentiators.

The summary is likely to be the part of your proposal that is most widely distributed and read. So make it clear, concise, jargon-free, and well written. Focus squarely on the client's desired results, not the consultant's commercial.

Keep the executive summary to one or two pages, if possible. For complex or long proposals, use your judgment, but err on the side of brevity.

► **Background**

Briefly describe why you are being asked to submit a proposal. Consultants like this section because they can demonstrate that they understand what the client wants. The background statement of one proposal read, "After several quarters of improving on-time shipping

performance, the client has asked a consultant to prepare a program to help other distribution centers in the company to achieve the same performance.”

The length and detail of the background section will vary, but it’s preferable to quickly get the reader through this section and show how and when the results will be achieved.

► Objectives and Scope

This is the “what” section of the proposal; it identifies what the consulting team will do to deliver the promised results. In one proposal, the objective was “to reduce the costs of third-party warehouses within 120 days to free up \$500,000 annually in working capital for modernizing a corporate training facility. The scope of the project is to focus efforts on cost reduction in third-party warehouses, not other areas of the client’s organization.”

As you draft the objectives and scope, be sure to obtain the client’s agreement. Often, the client will want to change objectives or expand the scope once the proposal is on paper. Once you’ve written the objectives and scope statement, confirm one more time that you’ve got it absolutely right.

On a recent proposal effort, a consultant followed precisely the objectives and scope statement included in a client’s RFP and confirmed it with the client two weeks before the proposal was due. In the time between the consultant’s confirmation and the proposal’s due date, the client made substantial reductions to the project objectives and scope without notifying the consultant. The result was a disaster. The consultant brought the wrong team to the client meeting, upset the client for wasting time, and lost the work.

Always be safe. Confirm objectives and scope early and often. Don’t expect the client to let you know about project changes—it doesn’t always happen.

► Results

Describe in detail the results you will deliver for the client. Specify, in concrete terms, the outcomes, results, measures of success, and time frames involved. Effective results are specific and quantifiable, and can be given a value. For example, “The project will result in a 20 percent reduction in employee turnover in the customer service function within six months, which will reduce new employee training costs by \$50,000 annually and will improve customer satisfaction ratings.” This project result is specific and quantified and provides a way to measure success.

Here is another example: “The project will result in a 3 percent increase in cosmetic sales in the next seven months due to improved inventory management in each store location.” The result is tangible, is measurable, and includes a time frame.

You must back up the results you promise with references and testimonials, but without a precise delineation of those results, your chances of winning drop precipitously.

► **Project Approach**

In the objectives and scope and result sections, you make promises about *what* you’ll do once the project kicks off. The approach section of the proposal states *how* you will deliver those promises. Clients pore carefully over this section.

Many clients hire consultants for projects they cannot do themselves because they lack either time or resources. So there is always great interest in how consultants propose to achieve the results they promise. For proposal writers, creativity, ingenuity, experience, and client knowledge are vital.

Consultants have many problem-solving methods and approaches, including project management tools, standard interview templates, and preconfigured work plans. But like an artist creating a collage, the proposal writer must put together a combination of tools, people, and processes that will work effectively for the client. The consultant must carefully think through every element of the approach to ensure that results can be delivered in the agreed time frame.

Be sure to explain how the work will be performed, including the responsibilities that will be assigned to consultants and to client team members. Proposals must state precisely what clients are expected to contribute. Spell out how much time clients will be required to spend on a project and the skills they will need. If you omit this information, you can be sure you’ll be asked about it.

Create a work plan for the activities that will be completed and the tools and strategies that will be used. This section will test your understanding of the project and convince clients that you have the best solution for their problems.

Consulting firms frequently present proposals that include detailed work plans accompanied by colorful charts and graphs. Although they may look good, they’re usually cut and pasted from other proposals and often miss the mark. Some consultants prefer to dazzle clients first and work the details later. But it’s better to work closely with the client from the start to customize an accurate plan that addresses the project’s objectives. The resulting plan will identify the

GUERRILLA TACTIC: THE CONSULTANT’S BALANCE SHEET

If possible, in either the executive summary or the results section of the proposal, note how the benefits of the project align with the fees for the project. In many cases, consulting fees are a fraction of the benefit clients receive, so bring that fact to the client’s attention.

level of effort needed to complete the assignment and will be essential in deciding what fees to charge.

➤ **Team Members**

Describe the members of the team with sufficient detail to show clients how each contributes to the result. List all team members, set forth their qualifications, and their roles in the project. Don’t list “to-be-named team members,” but state their actual names.

In proposals, consultants routinely promise to assign their best and brightest to the project. Chuck the hype and let team members’ qualifications speak for them. Provide a detailed resume, customized for this assignment, for each team member.

Many clients will insist on meeting the team members before approving the project. Anticipate this request and plan to have the client interview your team members as part of the proposal process.

➤ **Timing**

This section (also known as “the schedule”) sets forth the time period for completing the project, and each component segment. Be realistic and don’t make promises you can’t keep. Link all projected time frames to the availability of your resources, the client’s team, vendors, suppliers, and others who may be involved. Incorrectly estimating the length of a project, or a component segment, can jeopardize profitability and your relationship with the client.

Build the schedule with extreme care, diligence, and the client’s collaboration. Take into consideration the client’s issues, politics, culture, and seasonal demands. And remember that your client’s employees also have company jobs to perform. Don’t overlook vacations, holidays, and inevitable sick days, which can wreak havoc with the best-laid plans.

Describe the controls that you will employ to monitor timely performance and to keep the project on time. Show how you plan to make sure that the project will start on time, stay on schedule, and make up for any lost time.

► Fees and Risk Reversal

On receiving a proposal, recipients always go straight to the fees section to check the bottom line and learn how much the project will cost. Pricing is discussed in detail in Chapter 17, but here are some basic rules about how to present fees in a proposal.

The fees you quote in a proposal must be clear and unmistakable. You may present the client with a range of pricing options depending on how the project is staffed or the results to be delivered. It is helpful for clients to see options.

Some consultants like to describe their fees using the term investment, as in “Your investment in this project is \$100,000.” Clients see right through this nonsense, so tell them straight up what the project will cost. If the project is an investment, clients will amortize the cost on their balance sheets. Let the client decide whether the project is an investment or an expense.

Give guarantees. State, “If our service fails to meet your expectations, we’ll cut our fees in half.” Every client takes risks when they hire a consultant; so let clients see that your price has a built-in risk reversal provision. A guarantee helps to ease nagging uncertainties clients have about hiring consultants.

Also specify how you expect to get paid for your services. State how much you want up front, in periodic payments during the project, and on project completion.

In most cases, it’s appropriate to request a substantial part of the fees before you start the project; 25 percent to 35 percent is desirable. If your relationship with the client is solid, up-front payment should not be a problem. Most clients understand that consultants operate businesses and that cash flow is always a concern.

► Qualifications

Now you can toot your horn as loudly as you wish. Prior to this, your proposal should have focused on convincing clients that you understand their needs and on explaining your approach. Now it’s time to sell yourself.

Bring to life why clients should use your services and why they should want you on their team. Highlight the challenges you faced working through similar problems, the ways that you resolved them,

GUERRILLA TACTIC: CUSTOMIZE YOUR QUALIFICATIONS

When providing their qualifications, most consultants simply take the latest version of their resumes and paste them into proposals. They may edit slightly, but for the most part, they submit the same tired information. That’s a mistake. Instead, customize your resumes and qualifications to provide the best, most relevant, and client-focused information. Add appropriate stories, case studies, and testimonials; include names, dates, facts, and telephone numbers.

and the implications for the proposed project. Provide success stories, but temper them by not overstating your role; stress the results and client satisfaction.

Finally, emphasize the differentiators—the extraordinary qualities—that your firm brings to the assignment. Fully describe each special quality, quantify it, and state how it will serve and add to the project.

Many consulting proposals look exactly the same, so include three differentiators in your proposal that will set you apart from the competition. It’s possible you have a special alliance with an academic expert that will contribute to the project; maybe you wrote a book on the precise subject of the project; or maybe your firm was the first to use a specific business process that is needed to make the project successful.

Most firms try to differentiate themselves on price or qualifications. Be creative about what makes your firm better, different, or first at something. It’s a surefire way to win projects.

■ TWELVE TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

A public relations consultant sent a proposal to a client for the design of a small PR campaign that was to be a test for additional campaigns in the future. The firm presented a beautifully packaged proposal with a description of their qualifications, their understanding of the project, and their approach to completing the work.

After reviewing the proposal, the client noticed that the document footer showed a different client name, and in several places in the proposal, the previous client’s name also appeared. The client threw the proposal in the round file.

To avoid that fate, follow these 12 tips before you send a proposal to a client:

1. Create a powerful, concise executive summary.
2. Focus on results, which matter more than methods and processes. Clients buy methods and approaches only when they know you can deliver results.
3. Be generous with your ideas; don't hoard them. Show clients how innovatively you think.
4. The length of the proposal doesn't win, but quality does. Projects are not awarded because proposals pass a weight test.
5. The proposal content must be about the client, not the consultant. Take a backseat and focus on how you will solve problems.
6. Your liberal use of "best practices" will label you as uncreative. Find the blend of outstanding practices and innovative solutions that fit your client's needs, not answers that worked for someone else.
7. Accuracy is essential. Validate all data and double-check to make sure it's right before you present it.
8. Sweat every small proposal detail, watch for typos, use high-quality materials and make sure the right people receive the proposal on time.
9. Rewrite your resume for every proposal. Highlight the skills in your resume that demonstrate your qualifications. Your boilerplate resume is rarely equal to the task.
10. Let your proposal sit for a day and then reread it completely before sending it out.
11. Let your personality shine through your proposals. Give clients a sense of the firm and your style of working.
12. Don't let your proposal claims outdistance your true capabilities. Write an honest proposal or you'll pay dearly in the future with blown budgets and unhappy clients.

The consulting proposal is a necessary evil. A great proposal can be decisive in winning a project; a poor one can cause you to lose a project, even if everything else in the sales process has gone flawlessly. Use these guidelines to write a killer proposal every time.