

The Winning Proposal

So, you finally have that big request for proposal (RFP) in hand! You are just itching to start writing the winning proposal that will get you that lucrative contract. What is the secret?

Full disclosure: Yes, I have experience writing proposals. But I base most of what follows on many years as a contract manager writing RFPs, evaluating the proposals, and awarding the contracts. I am the person you are trying to convince with your proposal. I have seen the full range and I know what works.

There is an old army saying that “time spent on reconnaissance is never wasted.” That is certainly true in the proposal business. So first, **read the evaluation (selection) section of the RFP carefully** for two reasons.

- Ensure that you meet all the mandatory requirements. These are conditions that *must* exist before the contracting agency can award you the contract. These might include things like “must have X certification” or “must have at least Y years’ experience doing Z.” I am always surprised by proposals that clearly demonstrate that they do *not* meet the mandates even though the requirement to do so is very clear. I have no choice but to reject those ones immediately and that is just a waste of everyone’s time. But OK, I really prefer to contract with someone who is careful and attentive to detail.
- Examine the evaluation criteria one by one. If they are well written, you will clearly understand what the RFP is looking for and what qualities get what scores. So, score yourself. If you do not do well, that may be an indication that you could save yourself time by not submitting a proposal unless you know your competitors well enough to ensure they would score even worse.

Second, **read the rest of the RFP carefully and the statement of work very carefully**. If you are the experienced expert in your field, meet the mandates, and fit the evaluation criteria well, then the actual performance of the work poses little risk. Instead, your biggest potential problem will be dealing with a disorganized or unsophisticated customer who will soak up your time in a thousand ways that you will not be paid for. If the RFP is badly written and inconsistent, if the work is poorly defined, or if the project management structure is vague, then beware of a rocky road ahead. You might decide that you do not need the hassle, so just walk away. An alternative would be to increase your price. If you do not get the contract, you will have lost nothing. If you *do* get the contract, at least you will be compensated for the frustrating overhead.

Third and only after the first two steps, you can finally **start writing your proposal**. You have already scored yourself on each evaluation criterion. Expand upon that in your proposal.

- Ensure that you understand *what* the RFP is looking for and *how* you are supposed to demonstrate that. A well-written criterion will provide objective measures of compliance levels and corresponding scores. Demonstrate clearly which level you meet. I often encounter

proposals that do not answer the question, or are vague and evasive. Such proposals are not the foundation on which to build a successful contract.

- Structure your proposal so there is a clear link between each criterion in the RFP and the corresponding part of your proposal. Do not make the reader search all over trying to find answers scattered through a long document. This is not a problem with most online bidding systems because they enforce this structure.
- Do not add pages of marketing material trumpeting your success and expertise unless these are directly related to specific evaluation criteria; otherwise, they are a liability. The success of your proposal is a function only of how well it demonstrates suitability to the evaluation criteria.
- Do not mention specific price figures except on the price form. Doing so gets your proposal bounced faster than not meeting the mandates.
- Ensure that your proposal is well written, consistent, and unambiguous. Just as you try to gauge the character of the contracting agency and the potential relationship from the RFP, that contracting agency will be reading between the lines of your proposal to see if you would be a good fit. Yes, they are supposed to base selection *only* on the evaluation criteria, but a sloppy proposal is never a good idea, especially in marginal cases.

Fourth, in all of this, **do not be afraid to ask questions** if something in the RFP is unclear. Are there contradictions? Is vital information missing? Do you clearly understand the requirement and scoring for each evaluation criterion? The contracting agency may have made a mistake and would be glad to know so they could correct it. The flip side is if the issuing organization does not care about errors and the process is unfair because their procurement system is poorly evolved. That is especially problematic in a limited market with one large contracting organization and many hungry potential contractors who do not want to be labelled as troublemakers for asking awkward questions in an unfair selection process. If you can, walk away from such a situation and concentrate on better clients.

In most respects, then, writing good proposals is no different than any other type of writing: focus on the reader. Tell them clearly what they want to know in the way they asked for it. Make it easy for them to match what they're looking for with what you have to offer. And do not waste your time on projects that have a low probability of success.

Contact TimmiT for help in crafting that winning proposal. But only if you meet the mandates!