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Proposals That Mean Business

**Winning Their Business:
The 7 Habits of
Highly Effective Proposals**

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The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Proposals

The effort and expertise required to produce an effective proposal has been rising steadily for some time now:

- Technology is lowering barriers to entry in almost every field - the competition is growing and differentiation is getting harder.
- Consequently, the gap between first and second place is getting smaller and smaller: often only a couple of percentage points on the reviewers' scorecards.

What hasn't changed is this: there is only one winner. Everyone else goes home.

Welcome to the New Normal

In the New Normal, it's becoming less and less about what you can do, and more and more about how well you communicate it. The proposal document itself has become as important a tool in winning the business as the product or services you're offering!

Over the course of a career frequently punctuated by both proposal writing and proposal evaluation, I've come to realize that proposals that bridge those last few percentage points for the Win have a set of "habits" in common:

The proposal document itself has become as important a tool in winning the business as the product or services you're offering!

HABIT 1

They're Compliant

The job of the early round reviewer is simple - pare the number of proposals down to a few. They're looking for reasons to reject. And the fastest way for a proposal to end up on the early "go home" list is failing to follow instructions.

The first task of the successful proposal, therefore, is to make **absolutely** sure it:

- Responds **directly** to every question being asked, and every concern being raised.
- Is formatted **exactly** as requested.

So even if you think your prospect is asking the wrong questions, and even if the RFP response format makes a hash of your attempt to put together a response that builds a case, **start** by putting together a proposal that conforms to the RFP **exactly**. In fact, be sure to include a table (called a “compliance matrix”) that lists every requested item and where (and how) you’ve responded to it. Simple non-compliance is the Number 1 reason proposals get rejected early – make sure the reviewers know this isn’t you.

Then, if necessary, get creative.

If their entire premise is mistaken, submit a separate proposal that responds to the “right” questions, and show how this alternative provides even more benefit to the prospect’s company while still addressing their stated problems and concerns. Naturally, be polite and courteous about why you’ve decided to re-address their problem.

If their required format doesn’t allow you to logically present your abilities, then build your business case in the executive summary and/or cover letter (which are usually allowed to be free-form) instead of the main body. In the response itself, use transition sentences and phrases that tie things together in the way you want them tied together.

The Number 2 reason given by reviewers for rejecting proposals early in the review process is that they don’t directly address a pressing problem their company needs to resolve, a problem that is usually clearly stated in the RFP.

Effective proposals start their narratives by reflecting the prospect’s concerns and problems back to them in convincing detail.

The Number 1 reason proposals get rejected early?

“Failure to comply.”

The Number 2 reason proposals are rejected early?

“Failure to listen.”

This assures reviewers that your proposal is actually relevant to their company, and not just another marketing piece. Proposals that are simply compilations of product and feature descriptions without specifically tying them to the prospect's desired outcomes generally don't make it out of the first round.

For example, suppose you have a marketing materials software system that allows purchasers to manage all their marketing materials and campaigns through a nifty web portal. You can submit a proposal containing splendidly detailed specifications for your truly wonderful system, and chances are the prospect will say "so what" and toss it. Suppose instead you start off your proposal describing your prospect company's current marketing programs and the specific headaches your prospect is (probably) having managing them, and then, headache-by-headache, show how your system can relieve those headaches. Now you're talking the prospect's language, and she or he will read on.

Hint: if the word "boilerplate" appears anywhere in your proposal procedures, you are probably experiencing more than your fair share of early exits from the evaluation process for this reason alone. Boilerplate is easy to detect, and shows the reviewer you aren't bothering to listen to them.

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and start by showing that you are listening to them.



HABIT 2

They're Customer-Focused.

Effective proposals draw a clear and explicit line between each part of the solution they are offering and a specific and highly desirable prospect outcome. In marketing terms, this is the equivalent of focusing on benefits, not just features.

This habit is effective for two reasons. First, as the pace of technological growth and business adaptation continues to grow exponentially, features tend to even out and become less of a

It's not what you can do. It's what you can do specifically for them.

competitive advantage in and of themselves. Even if you have a to-die-for feature that no one else does, you have to show why the prospect should care. Because, and this is the second reason, in the end, your customer cares about outcomes, not features.

And not just any outcomes, but **prospect outcomes** that are **highly desirable**.

Prospect outcomes are those that the prospect cares about. Highly desirable ones are the ones the prospect cares most about. Their highly desirable outcomes should be easy to find within it the RFP. (If not, ask them!)

This is your value proposition. Make it a good one.

Sounds obvious, but many companies find it all too tempting to focus on what they do best, or on what they think are the best features for the prospect, and stop there. Take it one step further and connect those things directly to specific prospect outcomes.

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and show this by focusing specifically on the (highly desirable) outcomes the prospect can expect.

HABIT 3

They're Customized

Even if your off-the-shelf product or service is perfect, write every paragraph of the proposal as if your product or service was developed specifically for the prospect's current problem or opportunity.

Practicing this habit means resisting the tendency to (a) realize that your standard offering will meet the client's needs and then some, and then (b) going down your product brochure describing every terrific feature of your product or service in turn. Your prospect will realize that you are throwing the kitchen sink (however stunning) at them, and return the favor by throwing your proposal into the same stack as the ones that break Habit #1.

Don't overlook the intangible outcomes: they're often what can sell one company over another!

Every proposal should look and feel like it's offering a solution that's tailored specifically for this prospect's problem or situation.

To customize your solution, develop the habit of starting with the prospect's detailed list of requirements. Then, as you go down their list, include each feature of your product or service that meets that requirement or solves that problem. When you get to the end of **their** list, stop. There's the backbone of your technical proposal.

Once you've "created" this custom proposal for them, you can then offer up other elements of your off-the-shelf product as bonuses, as long as you:

- Be sure that they address an important prospect concern or problem. If it doesn't address a current (or future) problem or opportunity for the prospect, skip it. Period.
- Be clear in presenting them as an added but valuable benefit of selecting your solution, not a substitute for some requirement you couldn't meet.
- Describe them in a section visually separate from the main body of proposal text, like a sidebar or text box.

Avoid the tendency to brag about irrelevant features of your product or service – no matter how wonderful.

No matter what you think of your products or services, consider how they will look from the prospects point of view. And what they usually want is the "baby bear" solution – not too much, not too little. Just right.

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and show this by offering customized solutions to specific prospect problems.

HABIT 4

They're Context-Aware.

Effective proposals go beyond your solution to the prospect's immediate problem and demonstrate that your solution also benefits the prospect in a strategic context. You show this by explicitly identifying what broader opportunities the prospect will enjoy by solving the problem at hand. This discussion belongs in both the cover letter and the executive summary.

Show you have taken the time to think about your solution in context. Their context.

For example, if the prospect's stated objective is to reduce costs in their product delivery system, show them that your solution will not only reduce delivery costs, but the resulting efficiencies will also work to improve customer loyalty, add to their competitive advantage, and keep them current with industry best practices.

These may be obvious inferences, but state them anyway so that they know that you know. And if you can, back your strategic assertions with your own or third-party experience.

Knowledge of your prospect's big-picture context can come from the prospect company itself, from your own experience in the field, from research that you conduct, or preferably from all three:

- **From the prospect.** Most RFPs will supply some of the strategic context, either explicitly, or somewhat indirectly by describing long- and short-term goals. If you have any questions, have a strategically-minded representative from your team ask the prospect's project team about the overall context.
- **From your own experience.** No matter how comprehensive the prospect's information is, brainstorm with your internal experts in the prospect's field. If you can come up with opportunities they haven't even thought of, you'll position yourself as a valuable partner rather than just a vendor.
- **From research.** Even if the first two steps are successful, conduct a little outside research into the prospect company and its industry. You might get valuable insights into the current competitive situation, emerging market trends, and, if nothing else, improve your ability to talk their talk.

Here's where a little research can go a long way in creating a winning proposal.

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and show this by focusing intelligently on their strategic opportunities as well as their tactical problems.

HABIT 5

They're Collaborative.

Always, always market your company along with the specific solution you are proposing. Answer the question, "Why you?" Especially in complex and/or expensive projects, how a solution will be implemented, and the kind of working relationship they can expect while the project is underway, is often even more important than the specifics of the "what." The prospect isn't just looking for a product, but looking for a company they feel comfortable partnering with.

This is a senior management-type issue, so be sure to address this **explicitly** in the cover letter and executive summary.

Effective proposals succeed by successfully marketing your company along with the product or service. Be sure your proposal's approach, emphasis, and language reflect and build on your company's "brand platform." Sell not just on your company's technical capabilities, but on the intangibles that make you the right company for the prospect to partner with.

This habit also includes the important task of reassuring the prospect that choosing you is a **safe** thing to do. Include the right mix of testimonials, case studies, references, certifications, and so on.

Speaking of which, by marketing your company as a whole you've laid some terrific groundwork for the next project even if you don't get this one!

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and show this by addressing their concerns about a company they might be partnering with.

Show that their acceptance of your proposal has value beyond the solving of their immediate problem – show that you can become a long-term strategic partner for them as well.

HABIT 6

They're Congenial

Over and above the various forms of customizing mentioned so

far, make the proposal personal. The cover letter is a great way to start off: have it signed by a high-up person in your company, and have them *personally* commit your company to the prospect's success.

In the executive summary and narrative, write in business-casual style, one professional to another. Be sure and use "personal" words like "you" and "we." Make easy to read and understand.

And finally, try to know or discern something about the agenda of the decision-maker(s) at the prospect company. See if you can infer what problems they face in deciding whether to recommend your proposal, and directly (or subtly, as appropriate) respond to those concerns. For example, if you know that they are considering you but also a company they've done business with for years, address this "better-the-devil-you-know" concern with constant assurances that choosing your company won't put the outcomes (and their jobs!) in jeopardy.

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and show this by being addressed to a real person.

Address your proposal to a real person. Talk to them about what's on their mind in a friendly, straightforward voice, one professional working with another.

HABIT 7

They're Compelling

Besides the Proposal Manager, two other professionals (either internal or consulting) are needed to produce a winning proposal: a graphics and layout person, and a proposal-savvy writer.

Proposals that **survive the early rounds** are easy to read, easy to follow, and look and feel like a serious, professional attempt to win the work. There's plenty of white space, graphics that reinforce and connect easily to the text headlines, and side bars for emphasis and additional detail. Graphics and layout professionals can make this happen in their sleep. Anyone's else's work is going to look and feel amateurish, and can cause your proposal to hit the reject pile early. It makes no sense to skimp on this one, and most companies don't. Enough said.

Proposals that **win through at the end** are those whose narrative makes their case in the most compelling way. Professional proposal writers can make this happen in their sleep. They know how to hook the reviewers early, how to build momentum toward a conclusion, how to finish with panache. When the differences between winning and losing proposals is just a few percentage points, great writing will make the difference between “win” and “go home.”

With this much on the line, it makes even less sense to skimp on professional writing fees (or salaries), and yet many companies miss the boat on this one because they believe that proposals are “technical” and delegate the proposal to their technical departments. Yet, what we hear most from the technical or operations experts who are often delegated the proposal writing task is “I love everything about my job except the writing.” Definitely not the people you want trying to bridge those last few percentage points.

Speaking of ROI, consider the internal cost to your company in terms of hours of work lost by technical pros trying to do something outside their job descriptions, the morale lost by forcing employees to do something they hate doing, the extra time and resources needed for massive revisions to overcome both bad writing and trying to unify the proposal’s tone and voice...

Hire a professional proposal writer. Not only do they love the work, they excel at it. And it shows!

Winning proposals are prospect-centric, and show this by showing the prospect respect through a professional submission.

BOTTOM LINE

Highly Effective Proposals are Prospect-Centric

Proposal guru Carl Dickson has said that the one Deadly Habit of common to most losing proposals is that the proposal is all about how wonderful the submitting company is. It’s all about

Most second place finishers lose out by only a few percentage points on the review scale.

When you’re that close, the winners are the best communicators.

their history, their capabilities, their technology – and not about the prospect company and **their** needs.

Winning proposals, by contrast, are focused **completely** on the prospect. They focus on prospect outcomes and how they will be achieved. They talk the prospect's language and situation. And they earn the prospect's attention by being personal and professional at the same time.

The Proposal Evaluation Scorecard that accompanies this paper is a good way to see how you're doing - and what needs work.

Bottom line: Use these 7 habits to submit highly prospect-centric proposals, and you're bound to see your conversion rate soar.

Here's a first draft check:

Count the number of times your company is mentioned (by name or by "We" and "Our"), then the number of times the prospect's company is mentioned (by name or by "You" and "Your").

What does comparing those two numbers tell you?

Michael Kelberer is a professional proposal writer specializing in winning B2B RFP responses. He is as adept at conveying a company's strategic advantages and he is their technical genius, and he follows these 7 habits with purpose, power and panache.

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