

SEVEN SUGGESTED STEPS FOR DEVELOPING WINNING PROPOSALS

by

Eric A. Aaserud¹ and Richard W. Oehler²
Perkins Coie LLP

As government contracting opportunities in the federal, state, and local markets shrink through budget cuts and contract consolidation many contractors find that they have to work even harder to distinguish themselves to win business. One way to stand out is by writing better, more compelling proposals.

Of course, writing higher quality proposals is easier said than done. How do contractors turn their consistently losing proposals into consistently winning ones? The most direct path is found through (1) the development of a rational process and (2) a steady, going-forward adherence to that process. In this article we provide seven suggested steps that can serve as a model.

Assess the Opportunity

Set up an internal meeting to assess the opportunity and decide whether it is worth pursuing. Generally, you should invite the following types of people to the meeting: (i) those who know the government customer and the competition; (ii) technical people who can address whether the company can meet technical requirements; and (iii) personnel who are in a position to determine whether the company is *willing* to meet the contract's requirements.

At the meeting, evaluate program requirements, specific customer concerns, company capabilities, and likely competitors. Discuss "hot button" issues, key customer issues that may not be readily apparent within the solicitation itself.

Ask the hard questions. Is the company really capable of winning the contract? If it does win, will it be capable of meeting all contract requirements?

2. Make the Bid/No-Bid Decision

Make the bid/no-bid decision at the assessment meeting or soon thereafter. Reach honest conclusions about the customer, the competition, and the company's capabilities. Here are some "yes-bid" indicators:

- The company has a solid relationship with the customer.

¹ Mr. Aaserud, Senior Counsel in Perkins Coie's Washington D.C. office, focuses his practice on GSA Multiple Award Schedule contracting, commercial item contracting, small business contracting, contract claims, audits and investigations, and software and technical data rights counseling.

² Mr. Oehler is a partner in Perkins Coie's Seattle and Washington, D.C. offices. He has more than twenty-five years of experience in handling sophisticated disputes with the United States, including federal procurement matters, Foreign Corrupt Practices Act investigations, suits for money damages against the United States, export compliance investigations and federal grant matters.

- The company understands the acquisition history. For example, the company has reviewed broad agency announcements, requests for information, sources sought, etc., which suggest that company capabilities match well with the customer's needs.
- The company has met with the customer and has learned about the customer's unique requirements.
- The company's capabilities match up well with the solicitation's requirements.
- The company has good and relevant past performance.

Conversely, the following are "no-bid" indicators:

- The company's first awareness of the opportunity was reading about it when it was announced publicly.
- The company does not know what the customer's hot button issues are.
- The company is attempting to overly stretch its capabilities to meet the requirements.
- The company has to take exception to one or more solicitation requirements.
- There is an incumbent bidding, and the company has no reason to believe the customer is unhappy with that incumbent.

3. Form an Effective Proposal Team

Assuming the bid decision is yes, select as the project leader a person with a strong interest in winning. Other team members should include:

- A strong technical person responsible for (i) drafting the technical proposal sections to ensure they meet solicitation requirements, and (ii) checking content for technical accuracy.
- A person who understands the company's pricing and has the authority to make pricing commitments.

4. Establish a Proposal Submission Schedule

Establish a realistic schedule for writing and completing the proposal. Outline what needs to be done and set hard delivery deadlines. In addition:

- Assign sections based on knowledge, experience, and writing ability.
- Include adequate time for review.

- Include time for reproduction and the submission of the proposal.
- Include some "float" for unexpected delays that may arise.

5. Write Well

Here are a few writing tips:

- **Follow organization and formatting requirements.** Write down what the proposal must contain and how the customer wants it organized. If solicitation instructions are unclear, make one or more requests for clarification well before the proposal due date.
- **Follow mandatory requirements.** Flag all "shall" and "must" statements in the solicitation and follow them precisely. Try to comply with "should" statements as well. Clearly describe how the company will meet each and every requirement.
- **Develop a matrix.** Some solicitations require offerors to fill out and submit mandatory requirements matrices. If the solicitation includes one, then complete it per the instructions and include it with the proposal package. If the solicitation does not include a matrix, consider developing one of your own to help the company track and meet proposal requirements.
- **Outline.** An outline is a critical tool in writing a well-organized, responsive proposal. The company should not skip this important step.
- **Write clearly.** Aim for short, declarative sentences.
- **Understand the evaluation approach.** Consider the nature of the evaluation contained in the solicitation, such as whether it uses a "best value" approach or a "lowest price, technically acceptable" ("LPTA") approach. Best value evaluations involve tradeoffs between the price and qualitative aspects of offerors' proposals. LPTA evaluations, on the other hand, focus on the lowest price among offerors that meet the minimum technical requirements. A proposal in response to a best value solicitation should discuss allocation of resources that go above and beyond the minimum requirements (with correspondingly higher pricing). A proposal in response to an LPTA solicitation should focus on meeting the minimum requirements (at lower pricing). A failure to recognize and address these differences can result in a lost opportunity.
- **Emphasize benefits.** Do not dwell on product or service features. Instead, focus on customer *benefits* (i.e., the genuine value of offerings as seen through the customer's eyes). To write effectively about benefits, the company must understand what is important to the government customer.

6. Thoroughly Review the Proposal

Ideally, the company will conduct at least three proposal reviews: red team, legal, and management.

- **Red team review:** The red team is made up of knowledgeable personnel with "fresh eyes." The team should review the draft proposal in its entirety against a checklist. In doing so, the team should confirm: (i) the proposal meets the solicitation's mandatory and formatting requirements and (ii) the proposal makes a clear case for selecting the company over other competitors and demonstrates that the company understands the customer's needs.

The red team should ask questions such as these: Is the proposal easy to read? Can evaluators effortlessly find the information they need? Will persons not steeped in the technical aspects of the business understand the proposal? Are sentences short and clear? Did the proposal team generally write in the active voice rather than the passive voice? (The team might allow exceptions where it makes sense to emphasize the object of a sentence over the subject – e.g., "The money was well spent.")

- **Legal review.** An in-house attorney (typically working with a technical person) should review the proposal and assess whether the company will be able to meet contract obligations.
- **Management review.** A management representative should ask such questions as these: Will the value of the contract likely outweigh its obligations? Will the agency be a good long-term customer? Would an award help further the company's overall goals and strategies?

7. Create a Quality Proposal Library

There is rarely enough time to submit as high a quality proposal as intended. One way to improve efficiency is to create an updated library of high quality proposal modules that can be used in new proposals. The library could include descriptions of company management, the company's quality control system, recent projects, and past performance references.

This article outlines seven suggested steps for writing winning proposals. You may decide that a different process will work better for your company. The point, however, is to develop a process, ideally through collaboration and buy-in, then stick to it. The development of the process itself – and the belief in it and consistent use of it – can help your company win more government contract awards.