

BEST PRACTICES FOR PREPARING FEE PROPOSALS

BY ANNE SCARLETT

Finally, you receive a long-anticipated RFP!
Don't let all your prep work go to waste by
submitting a lackluster fee proposal.

IN THE ARCHITECTURE/ENGINEERING/PLANNING (AEP) space, the selling cycle is often years in the making. Years!

During the process, you touch the prospective client in myriad ways: networking events, meetings, project tours, conferences, award dinners, ball games, golf outings and so on. You also touch them via written communication: letters, emails, promotional materials, custom reports specifically relevant to their project, holiday greetings and more. It's extensive, expensive and exhaustive.

And then finally, you receive the request for proposal. At this very moment, you are at a crossroads: You can either maximize all of your earlier sales efforts, or you can diminish them.

Hopefully, throughout the whole process, you've created a solid relationship with this prospective client—a relationship that will stand strong against any mediocre writing or mediocre fee proposal. But why take that chance? Shouldn't your proposal submission be as superb as the balance of your sales activities?

Producing a Proper Proposal

Before you write the proposal, make sure you have all of the required information. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Have you conducted a stringent go/no go? Did you assign a probability to win the project, along with a budget to prepare the proposal?
- ▶ Have you established a strategy and overarching message that is based upon any preexisting knowledge you have around the client's needs, wants and preconceived notions? (This is typically guided by whomever holds the strongest relationship with the prospect.)
- ▶ Have you identified the team that will help assemble the proposal? Further, have you deconstructed the requirements and delegated specific action items?
- ▶ Have you provided clarity on who needs to provide what and when (specific deadlines) so that your marketing coordinator staff is not rushing to assemble a final piece in the eleventh hour (which, incidentally, is an unfair and disrespectful expectation of their role)?

Writing Tips

With those questions answered, it's time to start writing the proposal. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Crafting the cover letter and the project understanding section. Conventional wisdom suggests that these two elements are the most essential and thought-provoking components of an AEP proposal. They will require the most attention, insight, and creativity, as they should not come from boilerplate material. These aspects must be started right away to allow plenty of time for gestation and refinement.

Quick Tip: Parrot some of the prospect's language. You can glean from either their written or oral communications. Years ago, a fellow consultant told me, "No one can argue with their own language." It's often true. Readers will find it comfortable and familiar, even if they can't quite place where they've heard it before.

Explaining your project approach and scope of services. Specificity is essential.

Quick Tips: Include details that fully cover what you'll offer—down to the number of meetings, expected content within each deliverable and so forth. Because this can involve a lot of detail, you must carefully consider the aesthetics of this section, such as the layout, white space, color of text and consistent formatting, to avoid overwhelming your reader.

While it may feel risky to do so, here you must also cite the specific responsibilities of the client. Defining expectations will ensure that everyone is on the same page—that you're all in this together. This can include decision-making deadlines, turnaround times for providing information, communication preferences and commitments and lines of communication (who will be interfacing with whom).

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Craft this section as if the language is part of your formal binding contract. Sometimes, for smaller projects, the fee proposal can indeed become your contract if you include the option to sign and commit. Cover yourself. Aim to underpromise (or hit it on the mark) rather than overpromise. You'll end up with a happier client in the long run.

Answering tough questions. Some clients will ask some tough questions: How will your firm gain community support? What is your process for phasing a project during occupancy? What are your methods for building consensus amongst disparate user groups? Do you have examples of when the client was completely satisfied with your value engineering efforts?

Quick Tips: Create a library of brilliant responses to tough questions (use tags to categorize them) so that you're not relying upon memory to dig up a former response. If you are in a multi-office firm, make sure the entire marketing team has access to this library of answers.

Sure, you can get some inspiration from those prior proposal responses. But even so, you must also determine what motivated this prospective client to ask the question in the first place. Within your response, consider subtly referencing some of their "backstory." This will show you really listened during the sales process.

Preparing the fee section: Many, but not all, AEP proposals will ask for a fee within the proposal. While it may be disconcerting, some people on the selection committee will turn straight to the fee section before reading any part of your proposal (even the cover letter). But let's be honest here. When you are a buyer of a service or product, aren't you compelled to look at the fee section first?

It's a given that you'll keep the fee section straightforward, easily readable and with a bottom line final total. Depending upon the complexity of the project, you may even opt to proactively include line-item components for the client to make choices.

Quick Tips: Think about brief language, symbols, or imagery that you could add to the fee section to strongly encourage the reader to delve into your actual proposal content.

Pay attention to how the prospective client has asked you to format the fee. If they asked for a lump sum, provide it. If they

asked for a line item menu of options or alternatives, give it to them. If they insist that you provide hourly rates for individual team members, don't resist.

When you ignore the specifics of how they want to receive the numbers, you run the risk of alienating the prospective client. If you are concerned, then ask them why they want the fees presented in that particular way. Understanding their rationale will help you to better shape and strengthen your response.

Your proposal submissions
should be as superb as
the rest of your sales activities
and not an afterthought.

Proposal Extras

After you've nailed the above-mentioned steps, you have an opportunity to add things to make your proposal stand out. Here are three of my recommended extras:

Elevate the technology component. Provide interactive interfaces, such as links or QR codes for online viewing of special examples, drawings or ideas. Even further, prepare

brief video vignettes if they will help the prospective client see how your team works together or help the prospect learn more about the personalities of the team members prior to the project interview.

Ensure complete consistency among sub-consultants' materials. Eliminate the need to reformat materials. Instead, provide sub-consultants with a required template to complete. Specify not just the content, but also the sequence, aesthetic design and layout and writing style.

Customize resumes to the nth degree. It's a given that you'll customize the resumes in terms of relevant project experience. But if you have time, you can also go through each resume and create a cross-reference to the prospective project or use parallel language to the RFP.

Do you believe the sole purpose of an AEP proposal is to get shortlisted for the formal interview? Do you believe that once the firms are shortlisted, all teams revert to a level playing field? This is a common line of thinking in our industry, and sometimes it's true. But it's a risky assumption. Why not instead give 110% to the proposal component with the hope that some members of the selection committee have long memories and will go into the interview process with a preconceived bias towards your firm? Now, *that's* worth the risk. ■