

Getting the contract

Government business hinges on well-written proposals

by Paul Koscak

Spend some time online perusing the General Services Administration schedule and the website Fedbizops, and you quickly learn there are thousands of opportunities to work for Uncle Sam. The government needs everything from printing services to intelligence gathering, and it spends up to \$500 billion each year on contractors.

Contracting is a pillar of the economy in Northern Virginia, where many gleaming steel and glass corporate structures on the Capital Beltway were built on government work. But you don't need to be a big player to compete for your share of federal contracts. Bidding is open to anyone who's capable of doing the job. What you need is the savvy to write a winning proposal.

Proposal writing is a combination of science and art. The science involves determining whether your business can deliver the goods and address the requirements of the Request for Proposal, or RFP. The art involves your ability to learn about the needs and culture of the government agency soliciting the proposal.

Winning a contract begins before the RFP is even issued. The savvy proposal writer (for small companies, that could be anyone from a salesman to the CEO) anticipates an agency's needs by gathering information from dozens of sources, says Bob Kucharuk, a proposal writer for Eagle Strategic Services in Woodbridge. "You've got to get into government — go to conferences, read speeches, listen to Federal News Radio, check government blogs and social networks to gather clues," he says.

This kind of sleuthing is known as "capture planning" in the proposal business. Capture planning focuses on



Bob Kucharuk says a savvy proposal writer anticipates an agency's needs.

getting to know your customer. "Companies will sometimes even hire someone from the government who has inside knowledge," says Kucharuk.

While proposals are formatted the same way — with sections for instructions, evaluation and statement of work — successful proposal writers will ensure the document is compliant and compelling, says Kucharuk. Compliant simply means following the agency's instructions while a compelling proposal gives the evaluating committee a reason to consider your company. This is where you provide details, explaining exactly what your company can do to satisfy an agency's request, he says. "Don't be wishy-washy, but don't overextend," says Kucharuk. At the same time "if you bore the reader, you won't win."

Sometimes being compliant could be as simple as putting the proposal in a brown envelope and using a certain

post-office box, says Chris Simmons of Rainmakerz Consulting, a Washington, D.C., proposal management firm. Otherwise, the agency has cause to toss the proposal in the trash right from the start. As for compelling, make the proposal stand out. Offer something unique, he says. This could be specific technical staff, certain years of experience or key credentials. Essentially, give your customer proof you can deliver the goods.

It's also vital to use clear and convincing graphics with attention-grabbing captions, says Simmons, who is on the executive board of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals. Supporting graphics could be the door opener when an overworked evaluation team is skimming through proposals that may top 100 pages. If a graphic captures the team's attention, the text may get a more serious read.

Text should be clear and concise. Proposals stuffed with dense, jargon-laden sentences that can be understood only by experts usually are the first to get the ax. "Write the proposal as if you're explaining something to your mother-in-law," Simmons advises.

That's because selection team members are not experts in the field. They're usually a group of three to five government workers who have other jobs.

Surprisingly, the weak economy hasn't dampened the proposal-writing business, says Alex Brown, who manages proposals for OST Global Solutions in Silver Spring, Md. He says business is booming not only with the federal government but in the state, municipal and commercial markets as well — where the same proposal principles apply.

Brown says those who invest in training have the best record in writing winning proposals. "You can learn on the job, but the success rate is less," he adds. "If you do the things you're supposed to do, you'll win." **VB**

Virginia's to

Meet the projects and th

Stories by Paula C. Squires

What value does it add? That was the question as the Virginia Business editorial staff reviewed submissions for the top commercial real estate deals and projects of 2010. If brokers were involved, we talked with them as well, and it was refreshing to see them strut. After all, it's been tough since the 2007-09 recession, with big deals few and far between.

Yet 2010 brought ripples in the ice. A new mixed-use high-rise glitters on the Norfolk skyline. A Fortune 500 company prepares to move into a new corporate home in Northern Virginia.

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