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Making Your Sales Proposal a Winner

What to do before, during and after presenting

By
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To put the importance of proposals in proper perspective, they are far more than a vehicle for conveying your message. They *are* your message. Sadly, proposals that could be winners are often rejected. They may be filled with information, but the message gets lost and they fail to capture the recipient's imagination.

To make sure your proposals get the attention they deserve, it helps to view them in three phases, before, during, and after the presentation. Each one plays a part in moving your proposal closer to winning the business.

I. Preparing your proposal

Proposals should be easy to follow. But watch out. What's clear to you, can be a mystery to others. Stay away from jargon, too. The ability to explain something simply earns you points.

How you structure your proposal makes a difference. Whether someone is reading or listening to it, organize it so the main points stand out. Of all proposal outlines, *Problem-Solution* works well because it keeps the focus where it belongs: on the customer.

The *problem* expresses your understanding of what the customer wants to correct, implement, or improve. It's your grasp of the situation, so it's critical to get it right because your credibility is at stake. If you fail to read the problem correctly, you're done! So, take it seriously and present a clear, thoughtful, and complete understanding of what the customer wants to accomplish. The way you handle the problem lets the customer know if you want to solve it or just sell them something.

If you've described the problem accurately, the customer will pay close attention to your *solution*. You want it to be viewed as thoughtful, efficient, and cost effective. A good way to do this is by proposing options, preferably three. This way you avoid putting all your eggs in one basket, which makes it easy to get your proposal turned down. With options, you can argue the benefits and limitations of each one in terms of good, better and best or low, medium and high cost, for example.

Offering options has another plus. It opens the door for involving the customer in a helpful give-and-take, rather than putting you in the position of defending just one solution. That's not all. Options can also help uncover issues the customer may not have considered.

II. Presenting your proposal

For presenters, their proposals can be more important than how they present it. This is a huge mistake. They're a whole package. In the customer's mind, *you and your proposal are one*. If one is weaker than the other, the proposal suffers. It's your show so do everything possible to position it to your advantage. Here's how to do it:

- *Set the stage.* Don't allow your customer to guess where you're going. Make it clear you understand the customer's problem and lay it out clearly. Then, indicate that you and your solution reflects your company's competence for solving it.
- *Maintain eye contact with your customer.* You want to make your presentation an engaging experience for you and the customer. This is why handing out hardcopy is a mistake; do it at the end. You want the customer to listen carefully and not be distracted by flipping back-and-forth through the proposal looking for the cost information. When you lose eye contact, you lose control. If you use PowerPoint, don't replicate your proposal, maintain eye contact by using only a few key words on each slide.
- *Communicate confidence.* Your proposal is designed to be persuasive. You've built your case as your presentation moves from understanding the problem to an on-target solution and then to the climax of asking for the order. At no point in the presentation is confidence more critical than it is here. This is where the last impression is the lasting one.

If the customer perceives your presentation as the expression of who and what you are, you're well on your way to winning.

III. Following up after presenting your proposal

Follow up is often a presentation's forgotten phase. Yet, it's the most important. The show's over. You worked to maintain control and now you've lost it. Your presentation's fate is now in the customer's hands.

Sure, you'll find a way to thank your customer for the opportunity to make a presentation. Even though you should do it because it's only polite, it seems rather weak and ineffective. Some way or other, you want do more, but not something inappropriate. But now is not the time for a sales pitch. *Stay on message.* Since it's likely your customer is considering several proposals, the task is making yours stand out. Simply and clearly in a few sentences (keep it short) reaffirm the accuracy of your problem analysis, along with the benefits of your solution. No waffling. You believe in your proposal, so stand by it.

From start to finish, from preparation to presentation to follow-up is a seamless process that can make your proposal a winner.

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