



PROPOSAL WRITING: CRITICAL REMINDERS – DO'S AND DON'TS

Every year U.S. government agencies award contracts for products and services worth hundreds of billions of dollars. It is important to note two important facts: 1) that some awards are made as "sole source" (i.e., non-competitive) to one particular company or organization; and 2) that the majority of contract awards are made on a competitive basis to the bidder whose submission is considered superior to all other bids or, in the case of a multiple award contract, to the multiple bidders whose bids are evaluated as superior.

The challenge, then, for any company or organization that is interested in submitting successful/winning proposals is to understand the critical factors in the proposal process.

Critical Reminders

To optimize the chance of success, it is essential to know:

1. The customer (their people, organization, programs and challenges, budget outlook, etc.)
2. The competition (who are they?, how will they bid?, what will they say about us?, etc.)
3. The procurement (pain points that this specific procurement is intended to fix, etc.)
4. That the most successful companies won't bid unless they know the answers to Items 1-3 above.
5. That the RFP (Request for Proposal) is the government's requirements document.
6. That the RFP be read and re-read many times to ensure understanding, (and submit questions if not sure).
7. That the bid/no-bid decision should, at a minimum, be based on how well the potential bidder knows the answers to Items 1-6 above
8. That the bid and proposal response must be compliant with every RFP requirement (i.e., must "answer the mail", respond as requested not as you think the government intends)

The importance of compliance is illustrated by a comment made to the author by a Contracting Officer at the U.S. Navy Patuxent River Naval Air Station who stated that, "It's amazing how much business and money they (bidding companies) could win if they only followed instructions."

The Proposal Writing Process (but don't start writing yet!)

In addition to the critical reminders above, and assuming that the organization has decided to submit a proposal, the next most important activity is planning. Planning must develop the bid strategy, lay out the project schedule with milestones, identify and select resources required, and finalize the proposal project plan and outline. Note that all these activities should occur before any writing begins.



Since the RFP will typically require that the proposal include a Technical, Management and Cost/Price portion (defined as Proposal, Volume, Section, Book or a similar term), the following are keys to remember for each of these portions. HINT: Be sure that your information is consistent across all volumes.

The Technical Volume

Do:

- Precisely demonstrate your experience and expertise in all areas of required performance.
- Use relevant past and current performance history to illustrate competence.
- Use knowledge of government's current problems (if known) to show the strength of your solution.
- Highlight experience (industry involvement, authoring standards, etc.) as discriminators

Don't:

- Use confusing, overly-technical language (not all government evaluators may understand)
- Use general statements or unfocused, unspecific material from prior proposals

The Management Volume (sometimes included with the Technical Volume)

Do:

- Ensure that key personnel experience, if required, meets or exceeds RFP requirements
- Use resume format if included in the RFP
- Show effectiveness of control processes, project/quality/risk management plans and Procedures – how well contracts are managed
- Illustrate expertise of every team member, including subcontractors, if applicable

Don't:

- Include overly confusing organization charts
- Change resume formats
- Describe processes or capabilities that do not apply directly to this procurement

The Cost/Price Volume

Do:

- Use government-provided formulas
- Ensure formulas are consistent with other RFP requirements
- Confirm that data agrees with Technical and Management volumes

Don't:

- Ever include the cost/pricing volume with other volumes

The government procurement landscape has its own rules, language, culture and sales cycle, all of which are very different than the commercial space. To increase the likelihood of success, it is essential to seek out and use every resource possible.

This article is provided by Bob Gahagan, founder and CEO of CCSI-Corporate Consulting Services, Inc., which provides writing and speaking communication strategies for government and commercial contracting, bids & proposals, oral presentations, and business development. He also serves as an adjunct Small Business Counselor at the DLA (Defense Logistics Agency) co-sponsored Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) at the Mason Enterprise Center of George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. He can be reached at gahagan@ccsincorp.com. His web site is www.ccsincorp.com.