

Eight Steps To A Better Short-Fused Proposal

What happens when your company receives a solicitation (RFP, PFQ, IFB, etc)? If you're earned the right to bid by passing through all of the up-front, pre-proposal gates chances are the bulk of your proposal is written and is just waiting to be fine tuned. On the other hand if the solicitation catches you by surprise someone will hit the panic button and pandemonium will be the word of the day for the next 30, 60, or 90 days. However, there is a vast difference between motion and movement and having the entire proposal team racing to fill the war room walls with boilerplate and generic themes may not be your most productive course of action.

Einstein said that one should use 90% of the available time to understand the problem. I'm not suggesting anyone spend 27 days of a 30 day cycle analyzing the solicitation but five to seven days isn't unreasonable and it will save you time and energy on the back end. So what do you do during this time? Well...

1. **Read the solicitation** – Too many times we just read the section that seems most important to us. The Proposal Manager focuses on sections L and M, the technical folks concentrate on section C, contracts group will assume that the Certs and Reps are standard and don't need reading until the last minute, and chance are that no one will notify pricing. At a minimum, the person responsible for each area proposal area should read the entire solicitation to catch problem areas, or areas of concern, before they cause you to either no bid or rewrite significant portions of the proposal at the last minute.

2. **Identify all performance risks** – After reading and understanding the solicitation identify and record all the risks and concerns of the individual readers. During the proposal development process all of the identified risks should be eliminated or mitigated.

3. **Formulate the basic approach** – How are you going to solve the customer's problem? If you're selling products rather than services what products meet the requirement? Will product integration be a problem or time consuming? If you're selling services rather than products will you bid contingent hires? Will project management be billed as overhead or direct? The more components involved the more difficult it becomes to build the approach. The more difficult or convoluted the approach, the more time that should be devoted to casting it in concrete before writing starts.

4. **Select teaming partners** – If you can't or don't want to bid the job alone you're going to have to select one or more teaming partners. Don't select a teaming partner because of their availability or a relationship you had in the past. Choose a teaming partner for what they can do to add value to the bid. If you're going to expect your teaming partner to provide any portion of the proposal make certain they have the commitment of their management and that their management understands the solicitation so they can assess their risks before delivery day.

5. **Develop a "should cost" model** – Of course if you haven't been close to the customer or if you don't really understand their needs you probably have no idea what they expect to pay for the solution which makes this task rather difficult. None the less, if you can't identify all the key cost drivers and their cost you are shooting at a target you can not hit except through luck.

6. **Outline the proposal** – The order of precedence when outlining a proposal is Section L, followed by Section M and finally Section C. It should go without saying that Section L being the "Instruction To Offerors" dictates the proposal outline. It may very well tell you that

such and such a volume will address some other section (such as Section C) but not necessarily. If it does, by all means do as instructed. If it doesn't don't panic it isn't always necessary to respond to the statement of work. If, given the latitude and the room, it makes you comfortable use Section C as the basis for outlining the Technical Volume/Section.

7. Decompose the solicitation – Whether you storyboard or work off of an expanded outline the solicitation must be broken down into requirements. Section L determined the outline decomposition determines what will be addressed in each outline segment. Word processing software makes this task simpler by allowing you to search on the word “shall” which indicates a requirement.

8. Prepare the proposal development schedule – I've found that the easiest way to schedule is to work back from the delivery date and consult with each of the effected groups to ensure they have time to complete their assigned tasks. Undoubtedly you'll need good negotiating skills to gain everyone's cooperation and remember, you only have a limited amount of time so spread the suffering around equitably. Also, even with everyone using spell checker schedule time for proof reading and editing by a trained editor. You will be amazed at how this improves the quality of your proposal, they will catch mistakes that you read right over. Beyond that ensure that you leave time for an independent review.

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[Dan Light Consulting](http://danlightdirect.com)
dan@danlightdirect.com • (540)219-0001