

Proposals - Necessary Evil or Sales Necessity?

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Sales and account management professionals cringe when they hear a customer say:

"Just send me a proposal...."

"You'll be receiving an RFP soon...."

"Sorry, but management wants to make this a competitive bid...."

Too often, the proposal is viewed as a necessary evil in the business development or account management process. Some sales methodologies teach us to avoid a proposal like the plague. Yet, most large, strategic opportunities with new or established customers require some form of a proposal -written or oral. Why then, do we treat the proposal development process as an afterthought, a *necessary evil*?

This article addresses four key elements of proposal development as it relates to creating a High Performance Sales Environment™ with Adventace® and Shipley Associates:

- ?? Understanding the role of the proposal in meeting customer needs
- ?? Improving customer focus in all sales communication activities
- ?? Developing a real customer-driven value proposition
- ?? Using a proven proposal process for winning business

The Role of the Proposal

A proposal is a sales document, period. It is used to promote the sale to existing or new customers. It is not a list of features or a document on technical specifications. If a proposal is not laced with customer language and linked to the customer's strategic vision and critical business issues, it will fail.

Before preparing or submitting a proposal, you must understand the evaluation process and criteria as defined by the customer. Can you answer these questions?

- ?? Who will be on the customer's proposal evaluation team?
- ?? Is there a quantitative scoring system?
- ?? How much emphasis will be placed on the technical solution, price, past performance, and the relationship?

Customer Focus - Will You Know It When You See It?

To some, being customer-focused means only being responsive - getting the proposal to the customer on time and meeting their requirements. Real customer focus is much more than that - it involves integrating customer hot buttons, critical business issues, and motivators.

You need to know the difference between hot buttons, critical business issues, and customer motivators. These must all be integrated into a winning proposal. You should use established tools to prioritize buyer issues, using their language and terms throughout the proposal.

Customer-Driven Value Propositions

Unless customers clearly see a financial return from your solution, they will be unlikely to invest in what you propose. Value propositions are a key part of any winning proposal. The value to the customer must:

- ?? Play-back their critical business issues, causes and solutions

- ?? Quantify anticipated improvements
- ?? Specify timing of benefits and costs
- ?? State the payback and ROI
- ?? Specify how results will be measured and tracked

Too often, *value proposition* is confused with *solution* - a real value proposition is the solution linked to measurable financial results. How clearly do you articulate *value* in your proposals?

A Winning Process

Sales and account management teams that meet revenue goals generally have a well-established sales process for winning business. As Michael Hammer, author of 'Reengineering the Corporation' said:

"If you take smart people and put them in stupid processes, you get stupid people."

Process requires discipline. Winning business in today's shifting market is tough. Solutions that were once unique and customized now are being viewed as "commodities". Do your sales and business development processes add value to the customer while building internal competencies and capabilities?

Necessary evil or sales necessity? You decide. However, while you are deciding, your competition is improving their proposal and sales processes, making sure their solution is the *only* solution in the mind of the customer.