

# A Tale of Two Proposals

**“**It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” Charles Dickens began his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with this oft-quoted contrariety.

None of us claim to be a Dickens, however, he does give us an opportunity to compare two distinctly different proposal efforts from firms whose preparation philosophy, and the resulting trauma that ensued, are as disparate as Dickens could imagine. We'll examine how each firm chose to represent the best their company had to offer their potential client.

**When you increase the chances of winning by making the short list, your effort should intensify –**

For this peek into the inner workings of these two companies, I will refer to Proposal No. 1 and Proposal No. 2 in order to protect the confidentiality of my sources. I am sure you will recognize a glimmer of your own firm as we weave our way through these tales, because we have all been there—experiencing the best and the worst, working with the wise and the foolish.

## **Making the "Go/No Go" Decision**

As consulting engineers and architects, our business goals, in the most rudimentary terms, can be summarized by three cornerstones of business:

- Provide a needed service to the client.
- Provide challenging, rewarding work for your staff.
- Make some money in order to keep doing Nos. 1 and 2.

When company management is presented with the task of examining an opportunity, which manifests itself in a marketing pursuit, these basic premises

should be taken into account. In the real world, as we know it of course, this analysis may occur less often – as we will witness as our tale unfolds.

At the outset, the "go" decision-process for both proposals were marginal at best. Both broke the cardinal rule of business development by not knowing their proposed client or anything about

the opportunity until the advertisements were published. Despite these obvious handicaps, each firm undertook some recommended homework to resolve these impediments. This, however, is where the similarities end, and the disparity begins, between the two firms.

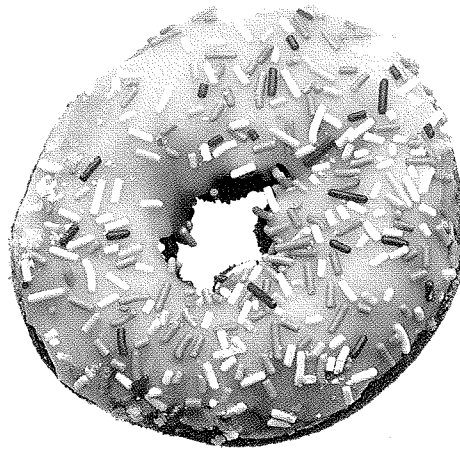
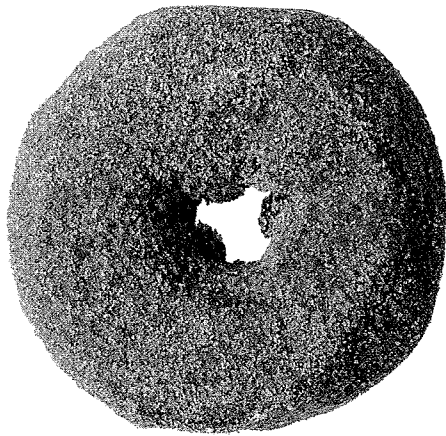
**Proposal No. 1:** The Technical Proposal Manager attended the client's pre-proposal meeting; used his network to find out who the incumbents were and how their contract performance was perceived by the client. Existing clients were contacted to eliminate potential for conflict of interest – one of the issues driving the decision. Based on the initial espionage work, their proposal effort was a definite "go."

**Proposal No. 2:** Although a Technical Proposal Manager was not assigned, a staff member who was light in billability during this time (read available) was assigned to "do some digging." Ultimately, the "go" decision was based on the enthusiasm of several key individuals in the firm, not on any real, solid information.


## **After the "Go" – Getting Started**



**Proposal No. 1:** The Proposal Manager strategized the effort, developed a budget, and prepared a schedule – all with input from the marketing staff. Responsibilities were well-defined and clearly communicated. The proposal team was off and running!

**Proposal No. 2:** Two principals, two associates, and the marketing manager participated in hour-long meetings to hash out the who-what-when-where-why questions that would drive the proposal. When issues weren't resolved, yet



another meeting would be scheduled. Who would be the Project Manager? Who would serve as Technical Proposal Manager? What would the organization chart look like? Did they need a sub-consultant? If so, what company would they choose? Who would seek that commitment, and when? And after four meetings, they still didn't have answers.

The internal politics of the A/E firm were complicated. One camp was most interested in finding something to occupy the guy who was light in chargeable , so they nominated him as Project Manager. The other camp was interested in presenting the best qualified Project Manager, but couldn't agree on the candidate. Although they all wanted to win the contract, no one had the time to step up as Champion or provide much input to the proposal. After some painful political maneuvering, a Project Manager was agreed upon. He also, by default, became the Proposal Manager. Unfortunately for the marketer, this individual was one of the firm's chronic offenders when it comes to meeting internal deadlines. Although a subconsultant was identified, Firm No. 2 was unable to enter into an "exclusive" agreement because of the delays.

While Firm No. 1 was well on their way to preparing a winning proposal, Firm No. 2 had already spent 21 of their 30 available preparation days. You might be asking yourself what the marketer was  doing all this time. Not resting on her  heels, she had tried just about everything short of standing on her head – she spoke up, suggested, joked, reminded, e-mailed, voice-mailed, cajoled, and urged – all with little success.

#### Writing the Proposal

**Proposal No. 1:** Although the Request for Proposal (RFP) requirements were extremely specialized and detailed, because assignments were made and clearly understood in advance, pieces came together like clockwork. The Technical Proposal Manager worked closely with the marketer every step of the way. He met his commitments – she met hers. They put the document through a careful internal "Red Team" review, and put the final polish on it well within their schedule.

ly. Then Engineer "A" put it back the way it was. Then Engineer "B" went to Engineer "C" to lobby for support of his position. Engineer "C" then reviewed both Engineer "A" 's and Engineer "B" 's versions, coming up with a new version that neither Engineer "A" nor Engineer "B" liked. Meanwhile, the clock ticked. Due to the schedule being eaten-up by the proposal jockies, and the pre-ordained lateness of the Project Manager, adequate review time for technical and subconsultant's material was not possible.

**– after all, you are competing neck-and-neck with others who ranked near your firm.**

They worked hard, no question, but armed with advanced planning and effective communication, they were able to work as an integrated team.

**Proposal No. 2:** On the other hand, this proposal team continued to be the bane of that poor marketer's existence. There was still no defined leadership, so the classic territorial matches began – Engineer "B" reviewed the work of Engineer "A" and changed it significant-

ly. Ultimately, Proposal No. 2 was a fine product thanks to the dedication and mystical powers of the marketing manager. We can only hope that each time a proposal is "saved" from the ravages of a poorly conceived game plan and helter skelter project team – someone, somewhere along the line, learned a lesson that will make the next effort go more smoothly.

### Getting Shortlisted

Lo' and behold, both proposals were shortlisted. When you increase the chances of winning by making the short list, your effort should intensify – after all, you are competing neck-and-neck with others who ranked near your firm. Often clients believe that any one of the shortlisted firms could do the job well, so now is the time to pull out all the stops and differentiate your team.

**Proposal No. 1:** Five firms made the short list with a total of three contracts to be awarded – not bad odds. To his further credit, the Technical Proposal Manager was not complacent or overconfident. Rather, his dedication to winning continued. Still following his plan, he had already consulted with the marketer to strategize a winning presentation – before the short list was announced. True to his word, the Technical Proposal Manager carried through with rehearsals – guided by the marketer.

**Proposal No. 2:** Six firms (out of 26) were shortlisted for one contract. As if their work wasn't already cut out for them, the first stumbling block they encountered was that the Project Manager had a conflict on the interview date – another short list presentation 300 miles . It makes a less-than-stellar impression to defer your interview when you are trying to sell yourself as responsive and accessible, nevertheless, he bought a couple of extra days. Further complicating the mix, the Project Manager placed considerable emphasis on the conflicting presentation because it was scheduled earlier – in fact, he didn't want to strategize at all until he had gotten over the first. The result? A hasty preparation that lumped strategy, production, training on new equipment, rehearsal, and travel into two short days. As usual, the valiant marketer rose to the inevitable challenge and produced another miracle. Sainthoods have been bestowed for less.

### The Cost of Winning Business

The labor budget for Proposal No. 1 matched expenditures fairly closely. This reflects the care taken by the Technical Proposal Manager to plan, and then execute, according to a well-defined blueprint for success.

Not surprisingly, the labor budget for Proposal No. 2 completely missed the mark. Actual labor hours exceeded budget by a factor of three. This poor performance stems partially from ill-conceived budget numbers generated by a novice who had little experience in this type of effort. However, the real budget-buster was the lack of coordination and leadership throughout the proposal process.

There are other costs associated with these proposals that are often overlooked. In order to understand the entire equation, we need to take these hidden costs into consideration.

**Proposal No. 2:** There is no doubt that the human costs were significant. Work was done and redone; fatigue and lack of preparation negatively affected the quality of the work; personal relationships were stretched to extreme limits; and other commitments were re-negotiated – leading to jeopardized schedules, quality, and relationships on other projects. Who really pays in the end? Your clients? And, how much? These important human costs, while hard to measure, are expenditures that can really take their toll on a firm.

**Proposal No. 1:** The Technical Proposal Manager was well organized and efficient. Looking to the marketer for her expertise, the Technical Proposal Manager took full advantage of her capabilities and input. It was a true team effort. That marketer will be eager to work with him again. She'll know that her input is important, and her efforts appreciated. In the future, this well-honed team will look forward to the opportunity to go the extra mile, if required, on challenging proposal efforts. The associated costs were negligible while the return on investment was huge.

### Lessons Learned

Your constant guide throughout the marketing effort is to keep the needs of the client at the forefront. The whole point of a proposal is to convey to the client that what you are offering is what they want and can afford. In my book, each proposal requires a tailored approach; however, a tailored approach doesn't need to be expensive – in dollars or in burnout.

As these two case studies indicate, there is more than one way to approach a marketing opportunity – it just depends on what talent and resources you have available, how much time and money you are willing to spend, and what experience you are willing to endure or inflict in the process. If the clients had been able to secretly observe these two firms and their proposals in process, which one do you think would have demonstrated the kind of work ethic they would most like applied to their job?

Now you are asking yourself the \$64,000 Question, "Did they win???" Surprisingly, both proposals were winners. Proposal No. 1 was a stellar example of what was done right, while Proposal No. 2 can be held up as a painful experience for that weary marketer and all of the other carnage that was left in its wake. There is undoubtedly someone in her firm who will counter with "but it worked, didn't it". I understand that the Vatican is currently reviewing her application for Canonization.

We have all been in similar situations and we know first-hand how important good planning and execution are to any proposal effort. So we do whatever we can to stage a production like Proposal No. 1. And sometimes things run so smoothly we are amazed; while at other times we fall victim to others' poor management, struggling every step of the way to the deadline. Keep in mind that every proposal is an opportunity for us, as marketers, to model wisdom for others who are foolish and to create the best of times – leaving the worst of times to our competitors. ■

Question	Answers: Proposal No. 1	Answers: Proposal No. 2
Has the firm been tracking the opportunity?	The first they heard was the printed announcement.	The first they heard was the printed announcement.
Does the firm know the client?	No history with client.	Little history with client.
Qualifications to do the work.	Very qualified to do the work.	Limited experience in a key element of the work scope.
What's the job worth?	Potential revenues \$2 million per year, for 4 years.	Estimated revenues in neighborhood of \$200,000 over 3 years.
Does the client understand what they're buying?	Educated client.	Uneducated client.
How much time is there to respond?	30 days.	30 days.
What opportunities exist to get more information?	Attended pre-proposal meeting hosted by client. Made networking phone calls to determine past winners and history of their contract performance.	Made repeated phone calls to client to obtain project background, technical details.
How much will it cost to pursue the opportunity?	The budget covered development of a new SOQ, technical proposal, presentation, and contract negotiations. Consulted marketer for budget estimates.	A budget was rumored to exist. Marketer was neither consulted, nor given a budget within which to work.
What exactly is required in the submittal?	Very specific, detailed SOQ as first step. Clear instructions.	SF 255 submittal.
Can an entirely in-house team win, are subconsultants needed?	All services covered in-house.	One subconsultant required.
Who will manage the proposal?	Technical Proposal Manager identified at the outset.	No one wants to commit to the effort, but they "really want the work."
How was the proposal developed?	Developed proposal checklist and schedule; identified authors, specific responsibilities and deadlines. Marketer handled all qualifications sections.	Marketer created most of submittal while technical staff argued over who would serve as project manager.
How will internal review happen?	Timely "Red Team" review by most senior, qualified staff scheduled as part of the process.	Last-minute review of own work by primary author.
Shortlist Interview.	Strategized and outlined presentation before shortlist was announced; rehearsed four times with marketer's assistance.	Had to reschedule interview due to conflicting schedule. Strategized, outlined and produced presentation two days before interview. Rehearsed on the way for audience of flight attendants.

### PROPOSAL STATISTICS

	Proposal No. 1	Proposal No. 2
Potential Revenue from Contract.	\$8 million	\$300,000
Proposal Cost (% of potential revenues).	.002%	4%
Number of gray hairs gained by marketer.	2	642
Increase in marketer's salary resulting from success.	0	0
Number of hours lost to fretting.	0	58
Number of personal favors marketer used up in order to make the deadline.	0	23
Number of times the Proposal Manager ducked the marketer's calls.	0	189
Number of times the marketer praised the Proposal Manager.	30	0
Number of curse words thought, but not spoken, at meetings.	0	2,493