Why the Words Matter

Six Reasons To Improve Your Proposal Writing

By Mike Plotnick

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Anyone engaged in the planning and production of A/E/C marketing proposals knows what an enormous undertaking it can be.

This often-grueling process involves the creation and synthesis of assets into a cohesive document that adheres to strict guidelines. Typically overseen by an overburdened marketer, the proposal process usually takes place on an accelerated timeline, with a lot of cooks in the kitchen.

Though proposals comprise only one component of successful project pitches, they help a firm (or multifirm team) earn a coveted spot on a shortlist or at an interview table.

In short, they're really important.

Yet, despite the significant resources devoted to generating these documents, they often get produced with a skewed focus on the visual elements. This is understandable: The graphic design, presentation, and packaging of proposals can enhance their overall effectiveness and impact.

But the words matter, too. Here's why:

1. The words form the foundation.

Even as RFP requirements, formats, and processes continue to evolve, words still function as the core component of proposals. They provide the infrastructure on which the entire document rises or falls.

Words alone won't win an assignment (nor will any other proposal element), but they can position a team favorably for future stages of a pursuit. Conversely, poor writing can help reviewers thin the herd of potential contenders.

2. Strong writing demonstrates strong thinking.

Concise, compelling writing conveys an ability to think clearly and strategically, which most A/E/C clients value in their project partners.

In fact, your proposal provides an owner or selection committee with its first glimpse of what it would be like to work with your team on a day-to-day basis.

3. Design and copy are symbiotic elements.

Seek inspiration from high-impact print and digital advertising, which effectively blends words and images to communicate core messages about a product, brand, or cause.

Though proposals are much denser and more complex than ad campaigns, they benefit from a mindset that views writing and design as complementary communication components.

4. Stories captivate people.

Storytelling continues to be touted as a marketing maxim because it works. Despite recent studies that reveal people are reading less than ever, individuals are more likely to read proposal responses that are framed as stories. This involves weaving facts, statistics, and assertions into narratives that illustrate how teams solved problems, overcame obstacles, or learned lessons.

Admittedly, storytelling's not always feasible within the constraints of an RFP. Still, examine the entire proposal draft with an eye toward identifying opportunities to recast responses as mini stories.

5. The words will inform and influence future marketing.

Because proposal management and coordination is so demanding, it can be easy to view the process as a one-and-done exercise.

But well-crafted content can often be repurposed and reused. If you win the project, the words will live on in future marketing materials—from website descriptions to award submittals. And even if the pursuit doesn't ultimately succeed, the responses will influence future proposal efforts.

6. Compelling writing is a true differentiator.

Having reviewed and contributed to numerous A/E/C proposals throughout my career, I've observed that most of them lack a distinctive voice, a cohesive point of view, and a disciplined approach to content.

Proposal writing—unlike graphic design—often depends on contributed content from many different sources, each with a unique writing style and point of view. Translating those divergent perspectives into a cohesive, engaging narrative isn't easy. But it's vital to ensuring the final document positions your team as strongly and convincingly as possible. ■

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How To Raise Your Writing Game

You and your marketing team can improve the quality and consistency of proposals by enlisting these tactics:

- Be direct in responding to all questions posed and information requested
- Use short, simple sentences with strong nouns and active verbs
- Limit jargon and trendy buzzwords
- Edit ruthlessly
- Avoid obvious pandering to reviewers
- Write (and design) for both skimmers and readers
- Honor word counts, as succinctly as possible. No reviewer is likely to be disappointed by having fewer words to read.
- Recruit at least two fresh sets of eyes to review the completed draft. One person will examine all content for accuracy, consistency, flow, and impact. And a second person will proofread the document for typos, grammar, spacing issues, and other design inconsistencies.

Here's a final recommendation for marketing directors, HR directors, and firm principals: Hire marketing professionals with solid writing skills and invest in them through ongoing training and development. Even if much of the heavy writing takes place by others within your firm, marketers should still play a vital role in editing and refining drafts to ensure they're succinct, consistent, and memorable.

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