

# **Architect's Essentials of Winning Proposals**

**Frank A. Stasiowski, FAIA**



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**Architect's  
Essentials of  
Winning  
Proposals**

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# Preface

When A/E/C professionals get together to talk about “the business,” an outsider probably would get the distinct impression that preparing proposals is *not* one of their favorite activities. And they wouldn’t be wrong. A/E/C professionals are in this business because they love to do the work, not because they love to sell their services. Moreover, proposal writing is time-consuming and staff-intensive, and sometimes can seem a waste of time and energy; on average, only 30 percent of proposals result in being awarded the project at hand. The increasingly rapid pace of communication has served to intensify the proposal-writing challenge. Typically, in the past, A/E/C professionals might have been given several weeks to prepare a proposal. Today, it’s not unusual for clients to want to see a proposal within days, sometimes even within hours.

It is in this challenging environment that you, an A/E/C professional, must find a way to make your proposal stand out from all the others stacked on the potential client’s desk, knowing that the client will probably spend only a few seconds forming an initial impression of your firm and your ideas.

Fortunately, there are effective ways to achieve the goal of standing out in the crowd. As you'll learn in this book, the most successful A/E/C firms have a system for evaluating opportunities, which means they don't waste time and energy going after business that's not right for them or that they're unlikely to win. Their staff members are attuned to the clients and the marketplace; they know how to analyze a client's needs and how to focus each proposal so that everything in it demonstrates how those needs will be met. Successful proposal writers understand the power of word choice and graphics to convey a strong, confident message. Successful presenters are skilled in creating the appropriate factual and emotional impact.

In short, by developing an effective proposal-writing system, and with staff attuned to the customer, you'll spend less time and energy while winning more business, whether you're a firm of 5 or 500. The essentials of preparing winning proposals are the same, regardless of how many people do the work.

I bring more than 30 years of PSMJ Resources experience in helping A/E/C firms plan, manage, and market their businesses to the preparation of this book. I know it can help you and your firm develop award-winning proposals that impress clients every time. By following the suggestions and techniques described in this book, you and your firm can and will be winners.

**Frank A. Stasiowski, FAIA**

*CEO & Publisher*

*PSMJ Resources, Inc.*

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# Proposal Planning

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# What's So Special About Writing a Proposal?

If you're a professional in an Architecture/Engineering/Construction (A/E/C) firm, it's probably because you love the work, *not* because you love *getting* the work. A focused, efficient method for writing winning proposals allows your firm to spend less time winning lucrative contracts and more time doing the work, or conversely, less time spending money and more time earning it.

Consider these scary statistics: A/E/C firms spend an average of \$5,000 to \$9,000 to prepare each proposal. Unfortunately, most proposals are bland and ordinary, and only 3 out of 10 actually bring in work. That means that for every 10 proposals you write, you could be spending up to \$63,000 for no return at all.

If that's not frightening enough, consider this: Reviewers at your potential client's firm will spend less than a minute flipping through your carefully prepared proposal to get a first impression of your firm and your ideas. If they decide to read the whole

proposal, they'll spend only 25 to 35 minutes on the document that took you hours, maybe weeks, to create.

What to do?

Learn to create stand-out proposals that separate you from the thousands of lookalikes submitted to clients every year. Keep your proposal on the top of the stack. Make your proposals special—focused, readable, convincing—in both content and appearance. Redesign your proposal-writing process to make the best use of the time and talent of the people in your firm. Stop spending money chasing business that you won't get and that might not even be appropriate for your firm.

**A winning proposal . . .**

is a project blueprint and, therefore, specific. Problems during the project concerning budget, schedule, and scope of work often relate to deficiencies in the proposal.

## **Stand-Out Proposals versus Also-Rans**

A winning proposal focuses on the clients' needs and concerns, not those of the A/E/C firm. You need to know your potential clients very well in order to identify their real issues (not always those stated in the request for proposal—the RFP), and counter those with the benefits you provide that will solve their problems.

A winning proposal will show that you understand the big picture—your clients' overall business and the competitive world in which they operate. It will show how you will add value to their operation.

The content presents clearly your logical, technical approach to their project, and shows that your plan will work. It presents an attractive fee in relation to the value you will add. It shows a clear link between the elements of the proposal and the evaluation criteria.

A well-written, winning proposal demonstrates your understanding of the clients' needs and desires. It restates the criteria for selection and details how your firm meets those criteria. It demonstrates the competencies and experience that your project team brings to this specific project. It's readable, concise, attractive, and well organized. Boilerplate, if it's used at all, is used creatively.

The also-ran proposals, the ones that sink to the bottom of the stack, tend to be too generic: they don't reflect the client's specific needs, wants, or concerns. They focus on the features offered by the A/E/C firms instead of the benefits those features could provide. Losing proposals are often packed with statistics and exhibits that are not relevant to the project, or they're padded with good-looking boilerplate that says little or nothing relating to the client's concerns at this moment. Losing proposals are disorganized, hard to read, incomplete, too long or too short.

## **Overview of a Successful Proposal-Writing Process**

The proposal-writing process can be more or less complicated, and involve several people or only a few, depending on your firm and the work you're pursuing. But three essential steps are critical in any process of creating a business-winning proposal.

1. *The go/no-go decision.* Evaluate whether you should spend your time and money proposing on a specific project. Consider your strategic plan, your financial objectives, and the value of this client to your business.
2. *The Issues, Features, Benefits, Proofs (IFBP) analysis.* Look at the project from your client's point

## Why Are Proposals Such a Chore?

Many firms consider proposal writing a necessary unpleasantness, rather than part of an ongoing, dynamic, well-informed marketing effort. They prepare proposals on an ad hoc basis, in preference to maintaining an efficient, thoughtful preparation process. Often they go after lots of RFPs, even if the work isn't what they prefer to be doing, or they go after appropriate projects even when they know they won't get the work. They "bulk up" the proposal with boilerplate, unnecessary information, or untargeted writing. Then, they don't get the work. This further convinces them that proposal-writing is a necessary unpleasantness.

of view. Which issues do they really care about? How can you address these issues? How can you prove that you can do it?

3. *The Red Team review.* Members of your firm—people who are *not* involved in writing the proposal—pretend to be the client and give the proposal draft a critical analysis from that standpoint. (The reason it's called the Red Team seems to be lost in A/E/C history. Red pencils maybe? The color of a stoplight? Team members raise red flags?)

Whether you have weeks or only days to complete a proposal, these three steps should be part of the process. Adjust the scale of your proposal efforts accordingly.

## Winning Proposals, Successful Firms

Proposal writing is a marketing function. The most successful A/E/C firms are market-driven, with dedicated proposal operations centralized under marketing. They screen opportunities, so they're not wasting time and money bidding on every RFP that arrives in the mail. They measure their success by customer

satisfaction. And they consider proposal-writing expertise career-enhancing.

In this book, we'll talk about how to design your proposal-writing process so that you bid on jobs that will be appropriate and profitable for your firm; and we'll show you how to create proposals that impress clients and win you their business. This information is based on observations PSMJ Resources made during more than 30 years of helping A/E/C firms plan, market, and manage their businesses.

