Top 10 Tips for Helping Writers Succeed

Kevin A. Switaj, PhD CF.APMP

BZ OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT

Introduction

Getting top quality content from part-time contributors is a regular struggle in the proposal process. It is our role as proposal professionals to guide our teams and provide clear instruction and support to empower all contributors. How can we help all writers, regardless of experience and ability, to produce winning content while making the process as painless as possible? This guide details 10 easy to implement, effective ways to get the most out of part-time contributors.

BZ Opportunity Management provides bid management, process optimization, and training support. Our client experience approach enables us to exceed client expectations through personalized support and solutions. We work closely with our clients to understand their specific needs on each engagement, and then provide the right team to meet those needs. Bringing in BZ Opportunity Management positions Government contractors to grow and succeed in an ever competitive public sector marketplace.

Tip 1: Provide Documentation and Research

Your Writer's Packet Should Include:

- Win Themes
- Discriminators and Differentiators
- High-level solution for each section
- Important client and competitor information
- The "wall of truth" (how to refer to self and client; key acronyms, other basic writing tips)
- All relevant solicitation documents
- Any other critical information on internal practices

Writers need to have the right information to compile high quality, relevant, compliant content. It is incumbent upon the proposal team to develop that background material and provide it to the writers in an easy to understand format. Each opportunity should have a writer's packet to give critical information about the bid. The format is not important; rather, focus on the best way to get your writers this critical information.

For research, encourage your teams to use the Internet to find relevant material for their sections. Provide an archive of strong content from previous proposals to serve as 'secondary sources' for their sections (to use as inspiration and ideas but not to be taken and dropped into the document with no editing or customization). In addition, business intelligence tools like GovWin and Govini provide great insight into an opportunity and client that your experienced writers can use to craft their messages.

Tip 2: Reinforce Compliance

Proposal managers need to make sure all information necessary to be compliant is provided to the writers. I believe in including all Government requirements for a section in the template document to provide the necessary information to the writers in the same place they do their writing. I have a specific style in my Microsoft Word proposal template for various types of solicitation text (Sections C, L, and M). Including the solicitation language in the template allows to writer to check off what he/she has already covered and focus on what still remains to be addressed. I also leave the solicitation language in the pink and red team review drafts to make it straight-forward for the reviewer to judge compliance.

Tip 3: Step-by-Step

Central Benefits of an AMU

- By having writers develop bullet points instead of full narrative, they can focus on getting the ideas right instead of grammar and structure
- It is easier to revise bullets
- Reviewers can focus on the ideas more easily

Handing any writer a blank piece of paper is a sure way to ensure failure. As proposal professionals, it is our job to make it as easy as possible for writers to develop their content. I believe in using an annotated mockup (AMU) approach for first drafts of proposal content. The AMU is, in essence, a simplified storyboard. For each section in the proposal, you provide four main headers (client needs, approach, benefits, substantiation) to develop bullet points under. The template also includes a place for the writer to insert a first generation graphic. Depending on the requirements of the particular solicitation, you can add additional sections and tables to account for documentation, risks, staffing, and the like.

After a review and agreement on the central ideas of each section, the writers can focus on building narrative around the bulleted points.

Example of an AMU

1.0   SECTION TITLE

Thesis/Opening:

- Issue 1 and overview of how we solve it
- Issue 2 and overview of how we solve it

What and How?

- Step 1
- Step 2
- Step 3 (etc.)

Feature/Benefit/Substantiation Table:

Takeaway Callout Box
Use this space to write up the key strength of our approach, the benefit to the customer, and a summary of substantiation (see below for definitions of each)

Figure 1. Title of Graphic
Action Caption Describes What the Graphic Tells Them and What the Customer's Benefit Is.

Feature	Benefit	Substantiation
	·	
	·	
	·	
	·	

Figure 2. Feature Benefit Table. *Action caption inserted here summarizes our key features.*

Tip 4: Training. Training. Training.

We need to provide our writers with the knowledge that best enables them to be successful. That starts with providing the right intellectual tools. We need to give writers a comprehensive training program to make sure they can develop quality content. For me, this requires a three-pronged approach:

- **INTRODUCE**. Provide a regular series of classroom-based, interactive training sessions to provide the company's overall approach to proposal writing and high-level tips for content creation, graphic development, and review guidance. Have as many people as possible go through the training to give your company as large a reserve pool of contributors as possible
- **REINFORCE**. There are multiple ways to develop short computer-based training (CBT) modules to allow writers to teach themselves and refresh the learning from the classroom courses. Captasia and the recording abilities in Skype for Business are but two options to develop an internal capability for CBT development
- **CUSTOMIZE**. For each individual opportunity, proposal managers should develop some short just-in-time training that can be tailored to the specific opportunity. Using this approach ensures your teams are ready to work, and you can use key ideas and win themes from the opportunity to make your points.

By providing the right training platform for your writers, you can enable their success and reduce your amount of rework.

BZ Opportunity Management offers high-quality training across the opportunity lifecycle, including proposal writing training. Reach out to us at info@bzopportunity.com or visit our website at https://www.bzopportunity.com for more information.

Tip 5: Tools to Succeed

A carpenter is only as good as his tools. Successful proposal writers need the right tools to put together content quickly and collaboratively. All efforts, especially ones put together by virtual teams, require a central repository to store all relevant solicitation, capture, training, proposal management, and (most importantly) content files.

A strong knowledge management system can make the difference between a team that meets deadlines with quality product and one that doesn't. The following is a list of potential tools to use. This should not be seen as an endorsement. It is simply a list of what is available and some personal observations from my experience.

Microsoft SharePoint. A general use tool for collaboration and document storage. A choice used by many companies because it is part of an Office 365 license. Very flexible folder structure that can be tailored to the needs of any department. Small learning curve for most people in line organization because many use it in their day jobs. Not specifically made for proposal development.

Slack. Most popular new collaboration software out there. Allows for easy chat, sharing, and collaboration. Limited free version with paid version offering a great deal of functionality. Popular among developer community. Not specifically made for proposal development.

Virtual Proposal Center. Proposal-centric collaboration tool. Specifically tailored for proposal development. It provides a central, secure proposal sites built off a common template with easy browser action.

Tip 6: Review Content Regularly

Regular color team reviews remains critical to the opportunity life cycle. Feedback from people outside the bid team provides necessary advice, management oversight, and new ideas to the process. It helps teams avoid 'drinking their own bath water' and ensures compliance with requirements.

However, waiting for the formal review process does not help your writers create great content. A good proposal manager provides regular, iterative feedback to writers. Providing this level of engagement is especially important with junior writers who need more hand-holding and encouragement throughout the process. Proposal and capture leads should read content every 24-48 hours to ensure compliance, provide guidance, and offer suggestions on improving content. Taking this approach allows writers to be regularly engaged while ensuring proposal managers do not get surprised by mediocre or missing content at the inputs deadline.

Check out Kevin Switaj, our President and CEO, present on applying the Pixar Brain Trust model to proposal review on our YouTube channel at https://tinyurl.com/BZOM-YouTube

Tip 7: Overcommunicate!

Standup Agenda Should Include

- Welcome
- Upcoming Deadlines
- Solicitations Updates
- Client and Competitor Information
- Section Updates
- Parking Lot and Questions

Proposals are never static. There are always developments and updates that need to be shared with the team. At a minimum, teams should hold daily stand-ups to provide a single update on solicitation activities, intelligence, and section progress. However, a good proposal manager does more. He/she regularly communicates with writers, especially those with minimal experience, throughout the development stages. Proposal managers should use informal communication techniques, including telephone, in person 'drive-bys' of co-located team members, and online tools such as Google Chat, Apple Messages, and Microsoft Skype/Skype for Business to keep in touch, check on progress, and ensure writers are comfortable and progressing in their assignments. Having that open door of communication allows the proposal manager to remain engaged and supportive and makes the writer more comfortable with the process.

Tip 8: Try Alternatives

I have had the great opportunity to coach my children's soccer teams over multiple seasons. The first season I coached, every single drill and game I tried worked. All the kids participated, had fun, and learned a lot about teamwork and "the beautiful game." However, the next season none of those drills or games had much impact. The assistant coach and I had to come up with new ways to reach our players on the fly to make sure they got the most out of each session. It was a challenge, but we rose to it and everyone enjoyed the season.

I look at proposal teams the same way. The tools I use to get content and enable success need to be flexible to account for the differences in each bid and each proposal team. A 'hands off' approach might work best with a team of 'A' players with lots of experience, but you might need to engage more often with a team working their first proposal.

Sometimes the way to manage your team does not become apparent until after you have begun the process. Be flexible and willing to change how you get your team to the finish line with a clear, concise, compelling, compliant product.

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Tip 9: Proposal Writing is Something Different!

Proposal writing combines three different forms of content - technical, sales, and (most importantly) persuasive writing.

Proposals include technical content. However, we need to show the technical solution in a way the layman can understand. Each evaluation team usually includes at least one person who is non-technical. As someone without a technical background, I make sure the content in the proposals I lead are written in a way that I can understanding.
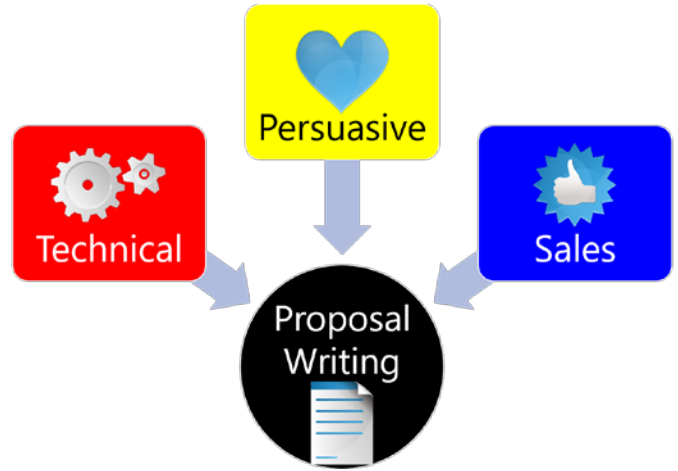
At some level, proposals are about selling your capabilities. however, it needs to be done in a way that outlines why the firm is the best partner for the client. The overall bid needs to be about the client and how our support allows them to achieve their goals. This is a subtle yet significant difference from traditional sales writing, which focuses on why WE are the best. By centering content around the client, we can make a real connection with them and, as a result, make them more likely to buy our product or service.

The most important component of proposal writing is making a connection with the evaluator. By definition, persuasive writing looks to influence thought and action by another individual or organization. How can we get our writers to develop persuasive text? Using the steps above, and specifically by ensuring the win themes, solutions, strategies, and discriminators are coming through throughout the process, we can guide the writers to produce clear, concise, compelling, and compliant technical content.

Writing a proposal that strikes a balance between all three components can make the difference between winning the work and losing it.

Tip 10: Think Visually

Most people are visual thinkers. 90% of the information sent to our ranks is visual, and we process images 60,000 times faster than text. Good graphics break up the monotony of text with interesting information. To appeal to all evaluators, we need graphics that reinforce the main themes and ideas of our proposal as a whole and each section in particular.

Proposal managers should work closely with the entire bid team to develop overarching graphics (sometimes referred to as "conops" graphics) for both the entire proposal and the key solution areas. These should flow down to the writers through the writer's packet (see point 1). Graphics should be part of the initial draft development (as outlined in point 3). For novice writers, provide an exemplar two of graphics from other bids or the internet relevant to the section. Proposal managers need to work closely with the writer to capture critical information in the graphic, and then use the caption to reinforce the benefit to the client outlined in the graphic.

Conclusion

The tips in this book aim to help your team develop the best proposal content, minimize headaches and all-nighters, and help you win more work. For all your bid needs, including writing training and support, BZ Opportunity Management stands ready to support you. Visit us at https://www.bzopportunity.com or email us at info@bzopportunity.com to get more information and set up a free discussion on your opportunity life cycle needs.