

11 Tips for Writing a Business Proposal

by June Campbell

Business in the new millennium means fierce competition, aggressive marketing and strategic alliances. The extent to which a business succeeds or fails often depends upon that business's ability to be awarded contracts or to attract other businesses into Joint Ventures or strategic alliances. To accomplish either one usually requires two key items: good ideas and the ability to present those good ideas in a **superbly developed business proposal**.

Business proposals are developed for one of two possible reasons.

(1) A business entity has called for tenders or has invited you to submit a RFP (Request for Proposal). In this case, your goal is to be "short listed," meaning that you will be one of the three or four bidders who is awarded an interview. Your proposal must stand among possibly dozens of submissions.

(2) You have an idea, concept or project that you want to propose to someone with the goal of gaining support, funding or an alliance. In this case, there is no competitive bidding process. However, your proposal must make a favorable impression and must explain all aspects of your proposed concept clearly and quickly. A document that is vaguely written, difficult to understand or that presents more questions than answers will likely be discarded promptly.

The following eleven tips are guidelines that I keep in mind when I develop a business proposal for a client of my writing service:

1. **Clarity**

Before you begin to write the proposal, summarize the concept in 2-3 sentences, then show it to a lay person and check for understanding. If they don't grasp the basic idea, rewrite until they do. Until you can do this, you are not ready to start writing the proposal. How many times have you received a document that you had to read repeatedly before you comprehended the meaning? When this happens, it may be because your comprehension skills are under-developed, but it's more likely that the writer substituted clarity of thought and good document structure with sloppy thinking, wordy, rambling explanations, vague descriptions and heavy reliance on buzzwords and jargon. It's worth saying again: *If you can't summarize it in 2-3 sentences, you are not ready to start writing.*

2. **Strive to communicate, not to impress**

If you have a good idea and you communicate that idea clearly and effectively, the recipients will be impressed. If you try to baffle them with your brilliance, you'll lose ground.

3. **Error Free**

Your proposal will be competing with proposals prepared by professional writers, graphic designers and desktop publishers. You may not have those resources at your disposal, but you can be fastidious about checking for typing, spelling and grammatical errors. Spell checkers can only go so far; the rest is up to you. Ask someone else to check your document for errors before you submit it, or wait a few days before rereading it. If you have worked on a document intensely, you will "learn" to interpret errors as being correct. It takes a fresh eye to spot the typos.
4. **Print and Bind**

Print your document on good quality, heavy-bond paper, using either a laser printer or a good-quality bubble jet. Take it to an office service for backing and binding. For less than \$10, you can produce a nicely done, professionally presented package.
5. **Layout**

When laying out your document, format it so the body of the text appears in the right two-thirds of the page. The one-third of the page to the left contains titles and white space. The white space to the left allows the reader to make notes. This sounds like a trivial matter, but it elicits positive reactions from recipients.
6. **Visual Elements**

Include visual elements sporadically throughout your document. Logos, clip art, graphs, charts, tables and other elements greatly enhance the visual appeal of your document and make it easier for many people to read and comprehend. Pages of pure text are tiring to the eye and a challenge to the attention span. Additionally, many people are visually oriented, meaning the preferred method of learning is through imagery and not text.
7. **Title Page**

Begin with a Title Page that includes images (graphics, pictures, etc.), the name of the proposal recipient, the name of the project, your company name and address, the date, and your copyright symbol.
8. **Be Politically Correct**

Whether you support political correctness or whether you don't, the issue here is to avoid offending the people who will receive your proposal document. Avoid any language that can be construed as offensive to any group of people - including women, men, persons with disabilities, persons belonging to visible minorities, senior citizens, and so on. If you're not certain of correct terminology, consult with someone knowledgeable before submitting your proposal.
9. **Write for Global Audiences**

Emerging technologies, immigration policies and agreements like NAFTA have produced a global marketplace. Documents nowadays should be written with the understanding that they may be evaluated by persons living in other countries or

by persons for whom English is a second language. Even if you are submitting your proposal to a local business, they may well have joint ventures with international companies, and these companies may be asked to peruse your document. Unless your proposal is local to a specific geographic area, avoid references that would not be understood by persons living in other areas (or explain these references if you must use them). Also, avoid the use of slang or expressions from pop culture. When persons from other cultures study the English language, they are taught to speak formal, correct English. They are often unfamiliar with the use of slang terms.

10. **Jargon Free**

Every industry has its own particular "language" - words, terms and expressions that are common to that industry but foreign to people from other industries. Avoid the use of jargon, or if you must use it, explain it. For example, expressions like "branding," "turnkey solution," "E-commerce" are not necessarily understood by everyone who is doing business. Also, remember that your proposal may go to a committee that is comprised of people from various walks of life. Make sure they understand what you are talking about.

11. **Technology.**

What was just said about jargon goes double for technology. If your proposed project involves the use of technologies, be very careful with your explanation. The persons reading the document may have little or no technological background. Therefore, in the body of the proposal, it's usually recommended that you explain your technology in terms of what it will do - i.e. "A data base that members can use to search for information about your products." There is a place for detailed information about the technology that you are proposing - and that spot is the appendix. In many cases, a non-technically oriented business will engage a technology consultant to review your proposed technology. This person can use the detailed explanations that you include in the appendix while other readers will be able understand the proposal itself.

Keep these guidelines in mind and you will be off to a good start with your next business proposal!

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