

On brand and on time

Client proposals are the most frequently produced marketing communication in most professional services firms. Matthew Record looks at some of the ways a firm can reduce the time it takes to produce bespoke proposals and ensure brand messages are consistently delivered every time.



By Matthew Record

Although as professional sales people we might not always agree that generating a client proposal is the first step in winning new business, it's an inescapable fact that lawyers, accountants, consultants and other professional advisers feel most comfortable with one in their hand.

The quicker any business can produce a tailored, branded, visually engaging proposal the better. Client proposals are mini-brochures about a firm so need to be as stringently branded as any glossy publication yet have sufficient flexibility to address all the issues the client has.

So what challenges do firms face in creating winning client proposals? The table in the next column sets out the challenges.

What steps can be taken internally to help produce these necessary documents and overcome many of the challenges identified above? And if the business development team are not aware of the client opportunity can a self-service type approach help fee-earners generate their own proposals?

AGREE A COMMON STRUCTURE FOR PROPOSALS AND PRESENTATIONS

Although we all have our favoured structure which we use to pitch for new pieces of work, it's often easy to revert to a style which is more about 'telling' the client about a firm first rather than addressing their needs and then stating the expertise and track record you have to deliver what they require. Providing the business with a best practice structure (for example, the 'Refuse to lose' approach used by PwC or Grant Thornton's 'No Second Chance') helps fee-earners adopt a more consistent approach to winning work through proposals.

PROVIDE PROPOSAL AND PRESENTATION TEMPLATES

All client proposals should be able to act in a similar way to a 'glossy' brochure but contain more relevant, direct and focused information about the client, their needs,

how you intend to help them and the credentials you have to prove you've done it before. Client proposals need to look every inch as professionally produced as your annual review. They need to be attractive, well laid out, visually engaging (diagrams, images and charts) and consistent.

The simplest way to achieve this is by providing the business with text-based (Microsoft Word) and presentation format templates. However why not have the templates professionally designed, use colour and a heading/subheading scheme throughout? This also avoids the need to push documents through a desktop publishing phase during the production process.

PROVIDE THE BUSINESS WITH A CONTENT MENU

The management of knowledge within

INTERNAL FACTORS	EXTERNAL FACTORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fee-earners have limited time to spend on pitching for new work • Proposals requiring cross-practice and international elements are more common • Firms must differentiate their offering from that of competitors • Client proposals need to work in conjunction with other external marketing communications • Internal clients demand first class information to build their proposals around • Partners and directors of firms want to express themselves as 'individuals' • Proposals often get recycled over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients expect tailored proposals and tender responses to be delivered faster than ever • The competition are continually upping the quality of their proposals • Information required by clients (particularly in more formal RFPs and panel reviews) is often quite extensive • Client proposals are just one of many types of communication clients see from that firm

professional services businesses is without doubt one of their strongest attributes and this intellectual property is their main revenue driver (particularly in law firms and management consultancies). The concept of 'precedents' and their use in building bespoke agreements, business models, etc. is second nature to professionals.

Building a bank of information modules about a firm's capabilities across their practice areas, key sectors or service lines uses the same principles as precedents but in the business development field. Modules can be as granular or broad as you wish. The key is to have modules of information that accurately reflect the situations a fee-earner may be asked to pitch in and the type of information that the potential buyer will find useful, eg. about sell-side M&A advice to private companies, projecting managing large infrastructure projects or managing auctions to private equity firms of SMEs.

You should also develop a range of general modules on the firm which provide much of the 'hygiene' information that buyers want to see about your business. For example, headcounts, vision and values, your disaster recovery policy, sample fee structures and the way you might work with other advisers.

WRITE AND PRESENT INFORMATION IN A CONSISTENT WAY

The tone and style of the information on your firm needs to be similar and to reflect the values and culture of your business. One danger of having multiple people write content is that they all have a different style so appoint one person to ensure all the modules are consistent.

Adopting a standard structure and approach to the way information is presented also helps the reader feel that all information in the proposal they read is from the same firm.

ENABLE THE BUSINESS TO ACCESS THIS LIBRARY OF BUSINESS INFORMATION

Information modules need to be helpfully and consistently named and profiled, then made available through the intranet or a document management system. The former works best if the business already actively uses one, the latter in larger organisations

and if you wish to offer quick searching facilities to find information modules with common profiles. It works best if the structure used to find the information works in several ways – say, mirroring the way fee-earners are set up internally or how the firm goes to market. Many firms such as Dechert and Osborne Clarke are implementing business information directories (BID) using Interwoven's WorkSite product.

Although we often wish to be involved in screening sales opportunities and the documentation professional's use, the reality is we have to provide the business with the right tools and then trust them to use them correctly. Training and asking for feedback is therefore essential and this must be done in a repeated way to ensure best practice is adopted.

A further benefit of using a module and library approach is that fee-earners start to create documents from fresh rather than recycle old (and out of date) proposals.

ENSURE THAT THE INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE IS ALWAYS ACCURATE

You can avoid much of the usual rewriting of draft pitches by ensuring that the information modules available to the business are regularly refreshed. Having a cycle to ensure the information is kept up to date will ensure fee-earners have confidence in the quality of information modules and quietly shifts more responsibility onto them to ensure they keep them up to date.

It works most effectively if you appoint a member of the sales/marketing team to own each information module and a business owner to sign it off.

USE AN AUTOMATIC DOCUMENT ASSEMBLY TOOL TO SPEED UP THE PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS

Although the steps above will enable you to produce pitch documents and proposals significantly quicker than before, several firms are now rolling out software tools which enable them to drag and drop information into proposals. Software such as HotDocs, Tikit's D3 and in-house designed tools such as Osborne Clarke's Parabuilder now provide slick ways to put together documents. Many of these software tools are already marketed to create client

engagement letters, legal contracts and technical documents so have a proven capability which are now being extended into the sales environment.

PRODUCE DOCUMENTS WHICH STAND OUT FROM THE COMPETITION

You can make proposals even more appealing by ensuring they get printed on higher grade, colour-specific paper. Some firms favour printing proposals onto pre-printed paper so that you can have coloured margins or watermarks. If you also spiral bind proposals or presentations into a branded wrapper or document folder they can be presented alongside other supporting marketing documents such as thought leadership papers or tombstones. This approach makes proposals seem more professional and better 'supported' at virtually no extra cost.

SUMMARY

Providing the business with pre-determined modules of information which represent the main products and services a firm has will significantly reduce the time it takes to create a proposal. The firm also has confidence that the information within the proposal is accurate and written in a way which helps get across their message clearly and succinctly. These modules of information can also be used in other marketing communications such as lateral hire documents, directory submissions, sent to journalists or for the website.

Providing a self-service mechanism for fee-earners to access this information themselves (or via their PAs) will also reduce the amount of administrative work that business development teams spend on supporting the writing of client proposals and reduce the time pressures most client proposals are created under. This will then free you up to focus the proposal on the client's real drivers in appointing one firm over another.

Matthew Record has delivered bid improvement projects at several professional services firms. Record Associates also provides interim business development support on client and transaction management, pitches and information management. Further information is available at www.recordassociates.com
