



DYNAMIC PROPOSALS

HOW TO CLOSE A SALES WITH A PROACTIVE PROPOSAL

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ost ideas that help close a sale have a large degree of common sense. Suggesting that salespeople should use a proactive customer

proposal to support their sale certainly falls into that category. But if that is the case, why don't more of you do it?

A proactive proposal is a document produced by the selling organisation at a key stage in the sales cycle to try and close the business. It is produced with the cooperation of the customer, specifically the project sponsor who, ideally, tests a draft version prior to formal submission. It is primarily about demonstrating understanding and capability, as well as exerting influence. A proactive proposal should deliver the following benefits:

- Demonstrates that you understand a client's plans and the solution they seek.
- Demonstrates your firm's capability to deliver a compliant solution.
- Exerts influence over the customer's business, strategy and needs.
- Sets the agenda, creating the need and the case for action.
- Tests the customer's seriousness, budget, expectations and timescales – a positive response is an early buying signal; a negative response will save you a lot of time and money.
- Tests your assumptions.
- Enables you to gain a better understanding of the politics, buying process and sign-off requirements etc.
- Gives your coach a return on investment for all the time they have spent with you.
- Gives your coach something to sell internally on your behalf, justifying his belief and sponsorship of you.
- Gives your customer hard facts and figures to base a decision on, rather than a perception.
- Puts you one step ahead of the competition.
- Sets an expectation with the customer of how you plan to do business and deliver your solution.
- May remove the need for a tender, which will save both parties a lot of time and money.



■ If it does go to tender, it will influence the requirement and content.

So what should a proactive proposal contain? The most important thing to weave into a proposal is understanding; understanding of the business your customer is in, their issues, their constraints, their timescales and everything you have learned from working with them to get to this stage.

Rudyard Kipling is quoted as saying: "I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who." Keep this quote at the forefront of your mind when crafting your words. Demonstrate to your customer that you understand the answers to all six questions. I would suggest a document structure as follows:

- A front cover, naturally.
- Standard proprietary stuff for your organisation (disclaimers etc).
- Table of contents.
- Introduction – a paragraph on the purpose of this proposal.
- Background – what led up to this proposal, ie meetings, demonstrations.
- Management summary – a maximum of two pages covering the following:
 - 1 Define your understanding of the customer's business requirements and issues – talk about them and don't mention your organisation.
 - 2 Define your understanding of the customer's required solution – the same rule applies, talk about them not you.
 - 3 Define your understanding of the

benefits and return on investment sought by the customer.

4 Define your proposed solution – what, where, when, how, who and save why for the next paragraph.

5 Define why your solution is right for them – three or four compelling reasons to buy your solution to meet their business requirement.

■ Proposed solution – an overview in a few pages of point 4 in the management summary.

■ Solution detail – a section that people can skim read that covers the widgets of your solution, ie standard marketing words and more.

■ Proposed costs – self explanatory, but ensure you give them choices if they need them, ie understand their budgetary position etc.

■ Assumptions – state any assumptions that you have made or agreed that would effect your proposal if they were not to be.

■ Company overview – talk generically about yourselves here because if they don't know most of this you should be doing this now anyway.

■ Options – talk about solutions that you want them to consider after this solution has been sold and delivered.

Depending on the complexity and value of your solution, such a document should take anywhere between one and ten days. A lot of content should be what is known as "boilerplate", ie standard product or service descriptions.

During our involvement with IBM/Lotus, we used the above approach with one junior salesperson who set an example for us all to follow. She took the first three points in the management summary (the ones that didn't mention Lotus) and developed the words hand in hand with her coach, getting his input and approval before submitting them to us for inclusion on the final document. This approach demonstrated initiative and a great relationship with the customer – and delivered the business. **SF**

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