


Zelda Greenberg,
owner of An
Ultimate Event in
Jacksonville, FL



POW

Sales Savvy

By Louise Bullis Yarmoff



After more than 15 years in business, Zelda Greenberg's proposal writing skills are razor sharp. The result: her event-planning and party decoration rental company, An Ultimate Event in Jacksonville, FL, almost always wins the bid.

Greenberg's philosophy is simple. "The proposal had better be polished," she says. "It's representing you."

Does your business respond to Requests For Proposals (RFPs) from the government? Do you send potential customers unsolicited proposals that pitch your product or service?

All proposals have the same goal: to suggest a solution to a client's problem and convince the client that *your* company is the best one for the job.

Whether your proposals take months or hours to pre-

pare, here are a few pointers to make them successful.

To Bid Or Not To Bid?

Don't respond to every RFP you receive, says Hans Tammemagi, author of *Winning Proposals* (Self-Counsel Press, 1995). Before putting pen to paper, make sure you really *want* the work. "You can't afford to waste company resources preparing a proposal if you don't have a realistic chance of getting the job," says Tammemagi.

Before making the bid/no-bid decision, answer these questions:

- ♦ Do I have the necessary technical qualifications to do the job?
- ♦ If I win the contract, how much profit will I make?
- ♦ How do I rate against the competition?
- ♦ Will there be any follow-

up business after this project?

- ♦ Does this project fit into my strategic plan?

Know Your Customer

Once you've decided to write a proposal, make sure you understand your customer's needs. Read each customer's request carefully. Your proposal should cover every point in the RFP.

Mary Anne Jackson's company, My Own Meals, Inc. in Deerfield, IL, supplies the military with kosher and halal (Muslim) rations. When she writes a proposal she makes sure all the RFP requirements are met. "Everything in my proposal is referenced to the RFP," she says.

Writers of long proposals usually create a matrix to show where in the proposal each item in the RFP is addressed.

Florist Bill Blythe, owner of

Proposals

Ver

How To
WRITE A
WINNING
BID

Getting Past The Gatekeeper

The more presentations you make to decision makers, the more chances you'll have of getting Requests for Proposals. But first you've got to get past the "gatekeepers" — the receptionists, subordinates and voice mail devices that stand between you and the person who will give you a chance to write a proposal.

Look at gatekeepers as stepping stones, advises Brian Douglas of StreetSmart Productions, a Redwood City, CA-based marketing consulting company. "When I reach voice mail after trying several times to talk with a specific decision maker, I contact the next person in command and make a brief pitch," says Douglas. "I try to get the subordinate to be my ally and relay my sales message to the decision maker."

Here are tips for contacting decision makers:

◆ Attend meetings, conferences and speeches

Make informal contacts with prospects. About two days after you meet, phone those contacts to make appointments.

◆ Work through organizations

Get referrals from leaders of well-known organizations, such as the chamber of commerce, a local trade group or church. Volunteering your services with these organizations can get you inside businesses, too.

◆ Call at unexpected times

Many executives get to work before business hours, stay late and even work on weekends. Try contacting them at those times.

◆ Ask the gatekeeper for help

A typical question: "Can you help me out? I need to know how I can be placed on your vendor-supplier list for proposals and bids."

◆ Put a promotional offer in your direct mail

Sales letters that lack a powerful promotional offer never get past the gatekeepers' waste baskets. Try offering the first month of your services at a reduced rate, for example.

◆ Put your prospects in the spotlight

Businesses are always looking for publicity. Why not interview some of your key prospective customers and include their stories in articles you send to the press?

◆ Be persistent

Keep in touch with prospective clients. Send an article that relates to the business and a note saying: "Thought you would be interested in this article."

—Richard Siedlecki

Blythe Flowers in Ottawa, IL, frequently writes proposals for weddings. For him, the process begins when a bride comes to his store and tells him what kind of flowers she likes. "If I can interpret what the bride wants, I get the work," says Blythe. "You've got to listen to the customer."

What's In It?

Proposals can be multi-volumed tomes or one-page summaries. No matter what the length, here are some elements to include:

◆ **Opening summary.** If your proposal is longer than a page or two, include a short summary at the beginning. Be sure to highlight why your company is best suited for the job.

◆ **Technical approach.** Describe your plan for completing the project.

◆ **Qualifications.** Here is the place to prove your company's expertise. Give resumes of key personnel. Include references of past happy clients. Tell what relevant experience you have. Florist Blythe, for example, shows clients photos of his wedding flower arrangements.

◆ **Appendixes.** In longer proposals, any detailed information should be in an appendix. Don't bog down the reader by including it in the main body of the proposal.

Throughout your proposal stress the unique selling points that set your company apart from the competition.

G & F Concrete Cutting, Inc. President Rita Ferguson emphasized the style of deep cutting her Santa Ana, CA-based business performs. She also bid on contracts open specifically to minority-owned companies like hers. Ferguson says businesses and agencies took notice.

"Our minority status helped us get started," says Ferguson, whose company cuts concrete for road and bridge repair projects. "But these days, we don't rely on it as much to get jobs. We've got a good reputation because we've worked for the California Department of Transportation and Disneyland."

How Much?

One of the most important components of a proposal is price. You don't want to bid too high or the customer may choose a lower-priced competitor. But if you bid too low, you may not make a profit.

To work out your pricing strategy, you need to gather information. First, determine the fair price for the project — what a typical company would charge to deliver a good quality product and make a reasonable profit.

Before writing her proposals, Greenberg spends hours on the phone getting prices from wholesalers for everything from food and flowers to staffing the event. She can then calculate her costs.

Next, find out what the client's budget is. Greenberg simply asks. If she has trouble getting an answer, she continues to probe with questions like, "What have you spent in the past?"

"It's the question they hesitate to answer the most, but it's the most crucial," says Greenberg. "I don't want to plan an \$80,000 event if they are only going to spend \$10,000."

Before you decide how much to charge, find out how important price is to the customer. If quality is more important than price, you will be able to ask a little more.

Ferguson submitted proposals for a road-cutting project three years in a row before she finally won the contract.

A PROPOSAL REPRESENTS YOUR COMPANY'S QUALITY OF WORK.

"The first time, we went in extremely high," Ferguson says. "Our labor costs are high because we're unionized. The diamond blades we use in our cutting equipment are also expensive."

Although she didn't win the contract on that go around, she did hear her competitor's bid

and got the information she needed to win later on. She was able to work with her accountant and her blade vendor to figure out ways to cut costs.

Presentation

The final proposal you present to the client should be neat and professional. You may want

to spring for a color cover to catch the reader's attention or hire a graphic designer to come up with attractive illustrations.

"Presentation is everything," says Greenberg. She puts her proposals in a nice folder and includes printed marketing brochures about her company. And she meets with the client to review all points in the proposal.

Keep language simple. Proposal readers have to wade through piles of information and don't want to spend time deciphering jargon.

Show your proposal to at least one other person in your company and have that person proofread it for spelling mistakes and clarity of language. Sloppy presentation will turn off a customer.

To make it easy on the proposal reader, devise a checklist by which decision-makers can judge all proposals — not just yours. Have enough columns for other presenters. Most of the time, the reader will use your form and compare others by your criteria.

If At First You Don't Succeed

Most small businesses don't win bids on the first try. But the proposal-writing process is a learning experience.

Jackson devoted five years to winning a contract with the U.S. military, because she knew that such a coup would prove her credibility. She learned the rules of the federal contracting game and even became a member of an association of military food suppliers.

"The secret to writing a winning proposal is perseverance," Jackson says. **98**

Louise Bullis Yarmoff is an associate editor of Business98.

Business98 Action File

Books

◆ *Winning Proposals* (Self-Counsel Press, \$13.95) by Hans Tammemagi is an easy-to-read guide to preparing proposals. It includes sections on efficient proposal preparation and the psychology of persuasion. Call (800) 663-3007.

◆ *Successful Proposal Strategies for Small Businesses* (Artech House Publishers, \$59.95) by Robert S. Frey is packed with information on how to respond to government RFPs. It includes a guide to the federal acquisition process. Call (800) 225-9977.

◆ *Persuasive Business Proposals* (Amacom, \$26.95) by Tom Sant explains how to write a client-centered proposal. Call (800) 262-9699.

Web Sites

◆ Proposal Group of Len Duffy and Associates at <http://www.lenduffy.com> has a list of resources for proposal writers.

◆ The U.S. Small Business Administration Web page at <http://www.sbaonline.sba.gov/expanding> has resources to help small businesses sell to the government. Check the "Expanding Your Business" section and click on "procurement" for help with government contracting, including preparing bids and proposals.

Trade Secrets

Don't Ask

When it comes to interviewing prospective employees, the wrong questions could land you in court. Avoid pitfalls with these dos and don'ts from the law experts at *Murphy, Smith & Polk's LawBulletin*:

■ **Don't Ask:** Are you a U.S. citizen?

Instead: Are you legally eligible for employment in the U.S.?

■ **Don't Ask:** Have you ever been arrested?

Instead: Have you ever been convicted of a crime?

■ **Don't Ask:** How old are you? Do you have any future plans to raise a family and perhaps withdraw from employment?

Instead: What are your qualifications for this job.

■ **Don't Ask:** What medications do you take?

Instead: Do you use illegal drugs?

Source: *Murphy, Smith & Polk's LawBulletin*. Annual subscriptions are free. Call (312) 558-1257.



Laptop Leasing

Before you fork over the cash to buy a laptop, keep this in mind: Laptops are outdated within six to nine months of their purchase. Leasing a laptop may be smarter — and less expensive, says *Tools & Tactics*. Try these strategies to cut a great laptop leasing deal:

■ **Location, location, location.** Eliminate the lessor's right to approve changes in location. You'll need mobility for a laptop.

■ **Who done it.** Who bears what risk and when? Accidents can occur when equipment is shipped to you.

■ **Same kind.** If the laptop is lost or damaged, make sure you can replace it with the same make, model and configuration.

■ **Upgrades.** Allow yourself the ability to trade up as equipment becomes obsolete.

Source: *Tools & Tactics*. Annual subscriptions are \$295. Call (407) 740-0700.

If you come across a great idea in your favorite trade magazine, why not share it? Send the article to:
"Trade Secrets"
Business98
125 Auburn Court
Suite 100
Thousand Oaks, CA
91362

Lip Service

Effective managers know how to talk to employees. Poor speakers face uncooperative workers, low productivity, high turnover and absenteeism. The management experts at *Communication Briefings* offer these suggestions for speaking — and listening to your staff.

■ **Give and take.** Communication is a two-way street. It isn't finished when you stop talking.

■ **Talk.** Don't rely on bulletin boards, memos or other written materials.

■ **Listen.** Respect what employees have to say. They'll feel like part of the team and will be more productive.

■ **Go one-on-one.** Ask employees to tell you how to help them do a better job.

Source: *Communication Briefings*. Annual subscriptions are \$79. For a free sample issue call (800) 888-2084.

Kids.com

Kids are growing up on the Web. And by the year 2001, an estimated 41 million homes will be online. Looking to cash in on the Sesame Street market? Follow these rules from *Target Marketing* to create a kid-friendly site.

■ **Planning to collect data from children online?** Make an effort to get parental permission.

■ **Inform kids if they're targeted for a sale.** State clearly that children need parental permission to order.

■ **Make your ads easily distinguishable from editorial content.**

Source: *Target Marketing*. Annual subscriptions are \$65. Call: (215) 238-5300.