

Sales Proposals: How to Write Proposals That Sell

by Alan Rigg

Depending upon how much you enjoy writing, writing sales proposals can be a joy, purgatory, or something in between. However, if you sell a **complex product** or one that involves the delivery of **professional services**, learning how to write effective selling proposals can be critical to your success.

Some proposals are written in response to an **RFP** (Request for Proposal) or **RFI** (Request For Information). Organizations that go to the trouble of writing RFP's want to receive **highly structured proposals**, as this makes it easier for them to compare responses from various bidders.

Some proposals are "**Boilerplate Bombs**". These proposals tend to be long, boring, and tedious to read. Usually they contain **minimal customer-specific content**. Often these proposals are written due to the assumption that "**bounce factor**" (how high objects on a desk bounce when the proposal is dropped on the desk) is what makes a proposal effective.

The proposal category that is the focus of this article is Effective Selling Proposals

These proposals are **lean, highly focused, customer-specific documents** that are written to **sell** anyone that reads them. How can a written document accomplish that feat? Through text that invokes **emotion** and provides **compelling reasons** that support a buying decision.

Before we go any further, let's review **the single biggest mistake in proposal generation - the lack of proper opportunity qualification**. Companies waste incredible amounts of time and resources preparing proposals for poorly qualified opportunities. These proposals have little chance of producing sales.

When you are armed with the necessary opportunity qualification information **and** you have made a **conscious decision** that the opportunity warrants the investment of time and resources required to generate a quality proposal, you are ready to write an effective selling proposal.

Here are brief descriptions of nine suggested proposal sections:

1. Opening: This is usually a single paragraph where you thank the people that provided the opportunity qualification information and **set the stage for the proposal**. The last sentence of the paragraph should list the primary value the prospect will receive by making the proposed investment.

2. Background: Your prospects know a lot about their own companies. They don't need you to provide them with a chronological history or a bunch of unnecessary facts. The bulk of this section should focus on **selected facts** concerning the **specific business functions or departments** that your solution will impact.

3. Current Situation: This is where you really start selling. In this section you lay out the prospect's **business problems** and the **impact** of the problems in painful detail. Your goal should be to invoke your prospect's **negative emotions** (fear, frustration, pain, etc.).

4. Desired Results: Your goal for this section should be to invoke your prospect's **positive emotions** (relief, joy, satisfaction, etc.) by helping your prospect visualize the "desired state" for their business.

5. Business Impact: This is where you **justify the acquisition**. What impact will your solution have on your prospect's business? How will their operations and financial results change for the better?

6. Decision Criteria: If you don't have a comprehensive list of the criteria that your prospect will use to make their decision, you probably shouldn't be writing a proposal. List all of their decision criteria here.

7. Decision Process, Time Frame, and Budget: The purpose of including this information in the proposal is to make sure you and your prospect share the same expectations.

8. Next Steps: There should be **specific next steps (and related time frames)** that are expected to take place after you submit your proposal. List them here to make sure that you and your prospect are "on the same page".

9. Closing: Close with a final paragraph that summarizes why your offering is the best solution for your prospect, plus a positive statement of expectation

Do you see the power of this type of proposal?

Do you see the benefit of eliminating volumes of boilerplate that do not address your prospect's **specific** and **immediate** needs and concerns? Do you see how an effective selling proposal can **influence the thinking** of decision makers and influencers, even if you have had limited (or no) personal contact with them?

If you construct your proposals in this manner, you will maximize your return on proposal writing time and resource investments.