

# **Customer-Driven Sales Proposals Can Give You the Winning Edge**

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Most sales proposals fail because they are written from the seller's point of view. Perhaps the sales professional did not gather the correct information. Or maybe the company insists upon using its standard "boilerplate" proposal. Whatever the reason, many proposals are sales-driven, not customer-driven. Sales-driven proposals illustrate the sales professional's and the selling organization's perceptions of what the buyer wants, while customer-driven proposals mirror the buyer's expectations. When a proposal doesn't narrow the "Expectations/Perceptions Gap" – the gap between the buyer's expectations and the seller's perceptions – the potential client has little reason for buying.

## **Sales-driven Proposals Contain Minimal Buyer Information**

The vast majority of companies can easily produce a sales-driven proposal— just replace the name and date on the cover page and let the word processor change the buyer's name throughout the document. A sales-driven proposal does not close the "Expectations/Perceptions gap." It does not help the buyer buy—it only tries to sell. It is usually a boilerplate proposal that totally ignores the buyer's expectations and unique needs and wants. A sales-driven proposal:

- Does not include a description of the buyer's current operation, available business improvement opportunity, or needs and objectives
- Has generalized money making or saving statements
- Includes a generic product or service description and benefits statements
- Does not include customer references
- Does not include specific productions, implementation, installation or conversion time frames and schedules
- Is vague regarding buyer and seller roles and responsibilities
- May only lists unit prices forcing the buyer to estimate total fees and prices

A sales-driven proposal includes minimal buyer information but an abundance of seller information.

## **Writing a Customer-driven Proposal Facilitates the Sales Process**

A customer-driven proposal gives the sales professional an opportunity to help the buyer buy. The writing process itself adds clarity to the sale. It helps the sales professional through the sales process because it:

- Prompts, and in some cases even forces, the sales professional to gather sufficient and accurate information about the buyer's current situation and organization; through this process, the sales professional builds a rapport with the buyer and identifies and comprehends buyer expectations, needs, wants and problems
- Requires and accurate description of the product or service being sold and defines its specific financial and non-financial benefits for the buyer; here the proposal can eliminate confusion and fulfil buyer expectations

- Includes a complete explanation of how the product or service will be installed, produced, implemented, delivered or introduced for the buyer; here the sales professional can use the proposal to meet the buyer's expectations by minimizing perceived risk and satisfying concerns
- Describes the business aspects of the deal, the buyers of the deal, the buyer's expectations relative to such things as the seller's staffing levels, roles, responsibilities, timeframes, fees/prices, and invoicing schedules

A customer-driven proposal meets and often exceeds the buyer's expectations. Writing activities are integrated with selling activities. Activities in which the buyer partners with the sales professional by providing information, confirming needs and objectives, and evaluating proposed solutions and strategies.

### **How Important Are Proposals?**

An increasing number of buyers are becoming more sophisticated and want to see specific, concrete proof that supports the claims made by marketing literature and sales presentations. For these buyers, there is simply too much at stake to take a risk on anything less than the best possible solution. In spite of these buyer attitude changes, many salespeople and organizations continue to discount or deny the importance of sales proposals. They view proposals as minor obstacles to overcome in the selling process or think that writing a proposal is easy and anyone within the organization can do it. In reality, writing a quality sales proposal is extremely difficult work and not everyone can or should write one.

A proposal is critical to the success of the sales professional and the organization. It represents the culmination of all selling activities—rapport-building, sales calls, demonstrations, letters and presentations. A winning proposal generates revenues to cover the cost of sales, creates a profit, and continues the existence of the organization. Furthermore, the content and quality of a sales proposal is equally important because it:

- Stays in front of a buyer long after the sales professional is gone
- Sells in the absence of the sales professional
- Communicates all aspects of the sale
- Gives the sales professional's internal contact a document to sell within the buyer's organization
- Reaches the final decision-maker, even when the sales professional cannot

A proposal directly reflects the sales professional's and the selling organization's abilities and the concern for delivering quality. In today's competitive world, can anyone afford to jeopardize even one sale with a poor quality proposal?