



# Proposal team refresh: 5 things to re-prioritise today

A compilation of best-practice advice from Business Development Expert, Robyn Haydon



Robyn Haydon is a business development consultant whose customers have won hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of business with some of Australia's largest corporate and government buyers. She is the author of three books, including bestseller *The Shredder Test – a step by step guide to writing winning proposals*, and her [Pimp My Proposals](#) program provides the cultural, commercial and competitive shift big companies need to win more competitive tenders and proposals.

Robyn is a popular guest blogger for Qorus. Here we have assembled her best advice for proposal teams.

## 1. Check your attitude to written proposals and RFPS

In the two decades Robyn's been observing people in selling situations, one thing has always been particularly fascinating to her. It's the way we spend ten times as much effort on a presentation that we know we will have to give in person, when compared to a written proposal or a tender response. Proposals have become the routine, marginal and painful work that no one really wants to do.

Yet we produce a lot of them. Most contacts say that their business, company or division produces anywhere from five to more than 30 proposals a month.

That's a lot of information going out into the market representing your brand, your work, and your value, and with the potential to open doors for you. Unfortunately, because proposals are seen as paperwork, rather than as an exciting opportunity to win new business, proposal teams may feel they are working in conditions that have more in common with a sweatshop factory than a modern business. Here are just a few of them:

1. No choice in what to produce
2. Inescapable grind; long days turns into long weeks, months and years

3. Constantly working extra hours to meet deadlines
4. Disconnected from the rest of the business
5. Under-appreciated by managers and leaders
6. Responsibility without authority
7. Produces output at the lowest possible cost, which is later expected to be sold at a premium price

If there is a disconnect between the conditions in which your proposals are created, and the outcomes you want them to deliver, you have got a problem. What you get is dull, mass-produced documentation, and not the dazzling, inspirational calls to action that you really need.

A proposal is usually the first piece of work a customer will see from you. It's the gateway to the opportunity you really want, and the chance to get in front of the customer to do your verbal pitch. As a business leader, it's your job to invest in your proposal effort and give it the resources, respect and reward it deserves. If not, your brand will be damaged, your work will be devalued, and those doors you want to open will remain firmly closed.

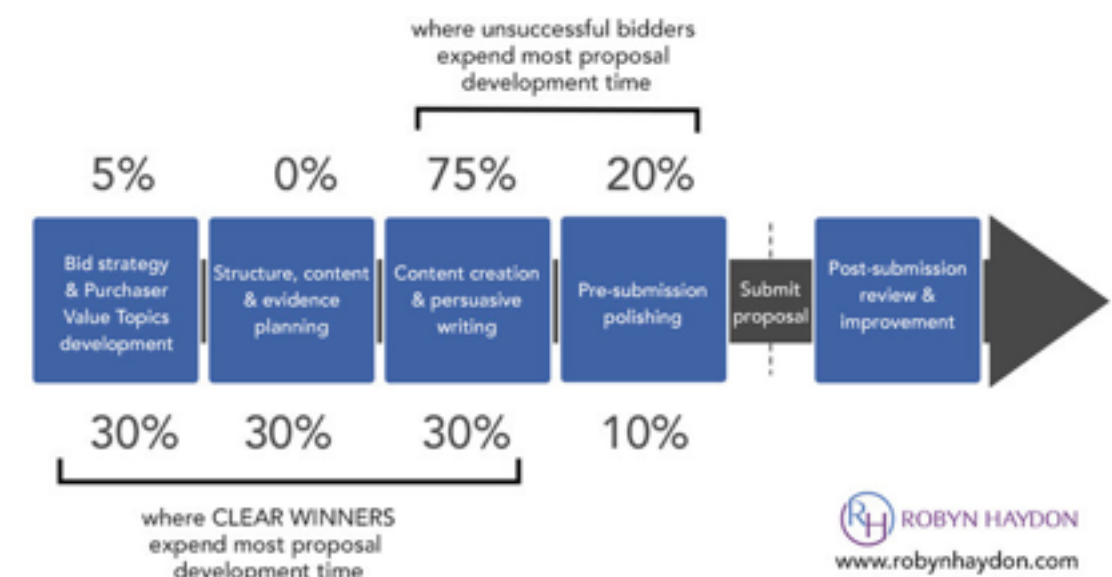
## 2. Invest your time in the right place

In a competitive tender, submission or proposal, the difference between winning and losing often comes down to where you spend your energy and your time.

**Your offer is by far the most important element in your pitch** – what will the customer actually be buying from you, and why is it the best option for them?



As this model shows, successful bidders tend to spend more time and energy working on their offer. (The numbers represent a percentage of total time).



Winners invest time and energy in developing their **strategy and key messages** (by exploring what the customer most wants, what they can best deliver, and what positions them most favorably against competitors) and in **content and evidence planning** (thinking deeply about the customer’s questions, structuring their offer, and finding evidence to substantiate their claims).

In contrast, losers tend to jump straight into **writing and content creation** (answering the tender questions) and end up with a lot of narrative that just isn’t very convincing. As a result, they also spend too much time on **pre-submission polishing**; effectively, re-writing the parts of the submission that just don’t work, in the hope that they will somehow create a cohesive whole.

Let’s say you wanted to write a book. You wouldn’t start by staring at a blank page; you’d start by getting a clear idea of your story, your characters, and where they

are going. If you jumped straight into writing, you’d risk wasting time writing pages and pages that you might never use.

Writing a submission that doesn’t win you any business is like writing a book that never gets published. (Also known as a “complete bummer”).

If you struggle to write successful submissions, your proposal process could be the root cause of the problem.

Use this approach instead, and invest your time where it’s going to help you win.

### 3. Never underestimate the power of a good executive summary

The purpose of an Executive Summary is to convince the buyer to say “yes” to your proposal. Unfortunately, many fall far short of this aim. Here’s what an Executive Summary is not:

- It’s not an “introduction” to the proposal.
- It’s not a summary of the technical solution.
- And it’s definitely not all about you – and nothing about the buyer.

A good Executive Summary sets out your commercial argument for the business in a clear and confident tone. A great executive summary does even more than this; it connects the buyer emotionally with your offering and your vision, and sets out an exciting future that they couldn’t possibly say no to.

Here’s how to distinguish an average Executive Summary from really great ones that will win you business:

Average Executive Summaries...	Great Executive Summaries...
Show how you will do the job	Show how you will deliver value
Talk about you and your credentials	Talk about them and their future
Make you sound like every other supplier	Make you sound like the only people they would want to work with
Are professional, detached, and a bit of a dull read	Are conversational, enthusiastic and interesting to read
Look like the one that was in the last proposal	Look fresh and exciting; are written specifically for each new opportunity
Sound like they are talking to no one in particular	Are a conversation at the highest level; as if your CEO was talking directly to the buyer

Next time, try writing your Executive Summary before you write your proposal. This will help you to get clear on your strategy, identify gaps and holes in the evidence you have to support the strategy, and build your team’s connection to the vision.



## 4. Keep your CV updated

There are three levels of writing you could be doing at any given time: private writing, descriptive writing, and persuasive writing.

**Private writing** is what goes into your personal journal; it’s the ‘stream of consciousness’ you unload onto the page to explore your thoughts and feelings. Private writing is raw and unformed, but that’s OK – you probably don’t intend anyone else to see it. You could call this “Writing 1.0”: writing only for yourself.

**Descriptive writing** and persuasive writing are both examples of writing for an audience, but they are different in important ways. Descriptive writing gives the facts and lets the audience form their own conclusions. Examples include report writing, essay writing and journalism that reports on the news of the day. Descriptive writing is “Writing 2.0” – writing for yourself, but also to inform an audience.

**Persuasive writing** gives the facts as well as your opinion, and seeks to influence the audience’s views, actions or conclusions. Examples include business case writing, proposal writing, and editorials, where journalists or commentators express a view on an issue of social or political importance. Persuasive writing is “Writing 3.0” – writing for yourself, writing for an audience, and in the context of a broader commercial, social or political environment.

Emotional Intelligence author Travis Bradberry says “Persuasive people are able to communicate their ideas quickly and clearly. When you have a firm grasp on what you’re talking about, (and) can explain yourself effectively to someone who has no background on the subject, you can certainly make a persuasive case with someone who does.”

To be effective in persuasive writing – Writing 3.0 – you will need to evolve your skills beyond private writing and descriptive writing.

For example, the way that most of us were taught to write at school is the wrong way to write when it comes to writing a proposal. In an essay, we are taught to introduce our topic, explore it in the body of the essay, and then deliver our conclusion. Writing like this is a bit like burying your gold at the bottom of the garden. No one will know it's there but you.

This is the total opposite of what you want in a proposal. There's no point burying your best ideas on page 23 if the buyer has already lost interest by then. In proposal writing, your conclusion needs to come at the start of your writing. Then, everything else you say provides evidence explaining why they should reach that same conclusion.

A study into consumer behavior by Dr. Robert Cialdini, author of the bestselling book *Influence* and emeritus Professor of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University, reveals why this is so important. Cialdini's study examined scripts used by the American Cancer Society when soliciting donations door-to-door. He found that a tiny change in wording delivered dramatically better results.

Instead of simply saying: "Would you be willing to help by giving a donation?"

Staff were asked to say: "Would you be willing to help by giving a donation? Every penny will help."

Prospective donors who were asked the second variation of this question were almost twice as willing to donate – 50% donated, compared with 28%.

The second question influenced donors to act, because it gave an important layer of context: that their donation was worthwhile and would make a difference. Interestingly, despite the use of the phrase "every penny will help", the amount they gave was not any less than the first group either.

And that's the key to persuasive writing. When we are writing to influence, we need to make the reader feel something, and then to act on that feeling.

## 5. Keep your submission in line and on time

From the time the tender is released, to the time you lodge your submission, you need to be continually working on your proposal.

Depending on how complex the procurement is, you might get anywhere from 2 weeks to 8 weeks to respond to a tender (the most common response period is 3-4 weeks). This sounds like a generous amount of time, but it isn't. Buyers work out the validity period based on how long they think it will take you to put together a tender response. The longer you're given, the more complex the requirement, and the more time-consuming your bid will be to prepare - and all this needs to happen on top of your day job.

Unfortunately, it's common to see people "sit" on tender requests for days, or weeks, while they are deciding whether or not it's worth going for, waiting for feedback from others, or just working on other things.

This is such a common story that if I had ten bucks for every time I heard it, I could be sitting on a beach in the Bahamas right now; in fact I got a call just yesterday from a client whose business had been sitting on a four-week tender for three weeks already, and had only just sent it to her to work on!

Your offer is by far the most important element in your pitch – what will the customer actually be buying from you, and why is it the best option for them? Any time you lose at the start of the bid schedule will have a compounding, negative effect on your offer, and therefore your chances of winning. Lose a week, and your strategy will suffer. Lose two weeks, and you will also miss key pieces of evidence to support your claims and maximize your evaluation score.

Let’s be generous and say that you have four weeks to submit your tender. Here’s how to spend each day in those four weeks to give yourself the best chance of success:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1	RFT release	Core team reads RFT	Bid strategy workshop – core team	Bid strategy developed	Bid strategy circulated
Week 2	Content planning workshop	Content plan developed	Content plan circulated	Draft writing commences	Draft writing
Week 3	Draft writing	Draft writing	Draft compiled	Draft 1 review	Final draft changes
Week 4	Pre-submission review and polishing	Pre-submission review and polishing	Production	Response submitted	DEADLINE 2PM

**Week 1** – Circulate the briefing to your team as soon as it is released. Give them a day to read it. Then run your strategy session. Once you have your bid strategy and Purchaser Value Topics ready, write a draft of your Executive Summary. Get agreement in principle to the strategy and key messages.

**Week 2** – with your bid strategy and Purchaser Value Topics agreed, now you can get stuck into planning your response. Analyze the tender questions; really pull them apart. Figure out what they are really asking for. What is the buyer’s motivation for asking? Is there a question behind the question? What do they want to expect to hear? Plan evidence to substantiate all your claims. Circulate your content plan with instructions to any other writers.

**Week 3** – gather all your content and start shaping it into a proposal. Circulate the first draft for comment and review.

**Week 4** – Make final changes, format the proposal and get internal sign-off. Submit it at least one day before the customer’s deadline.

Tender deadlines aren’t within your control, and it’s rare to see a tender period extended. Those weeks will go by faster than you think. This schedule will give you the time you need to think, and to plan your proposal, even when you are stretched with other priorities.

## 6. Conclusion

Sometimes we need to concentrate on the basics before getting stuck into the complexity of bids and proposals.



## About Robyn Haydon

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## About Qorus Software

Qorus is a popular provider of intuitive proposal software that plugs into Microsoft Office to create templates that integrate with a wide range of CRM and CMS solutions. A user-friendly online portal offers real-time views of proposal progress and simplifies project management.

SharePoint co-authoring enables users to collaborate on bid or pitch documents simultaneously. Robust document workflows ensure that re-usable content is stored and regularly updated by subject matter experts.

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