

Proposal Writing

A few useful tips on how to create better proposal

Proposal writing, tender writing, help, support & training



Additional resources
when you need them

1. BACKGROUND TO OUR APPROACH

Many people think bidding for public sector work is very different from bidding for private sector contracts. The reality is that it is actually very similar. Not only do you need to write the tender clearly, offering the customer what they want, you also have to establish the right relationship before you do so. The difference is that working out what the customer actually wants is a lot more complicated in the public sector due to the political and policy pressure applied to the Public Sector Organisation (PSO).

PSOs operate in a landscape which is politically driven. They spend tax payer's money to deliver services that are designed to support and improve society, hence it is right and proper that they have to consult widely and justify their decisions, not simply spend money because the individual official thinks it is a good idea. They have procedures and policies which set the boundaries within which they must work. In addition because they operate in a political environment, there are many organisations that have influence over the decisions they make. This means successfully bidding for public sector contracts involves more than simply writing a good bid. You need to understand why the client is asking for the piece of work i.e. what internal and external policy objectives they are trying to meet and which stakeholder organisations have/will influence the process.

Are public sector organisations innovative buyers?

Virtually every tender you see from a PSO will include a statement about their desire to see innovative approaches and hence you could be mistaken for thinking they are innovative buyers. The reality is they are actually defensive and risk adverse buyers. Because their primary role is to protect the public interest and not to act autonomously they will normally use an external consultant to create the business case and tender specification for what they want to do. They do this for two reasons. Firstly it demonstrates they are acting on best external advice. Secondly it means that if the project does not succeed it is not their fault. What this means is if your tender offers them an alternative, innovative approach to one specified in the ITT and they decide to accept it, the risk associated with failure, which they have so carefully placed on another organisation, is now back on them. Not the ideal outcome! What this means for you is your offer must exactly match the specified requirements.

The critical nature of experience

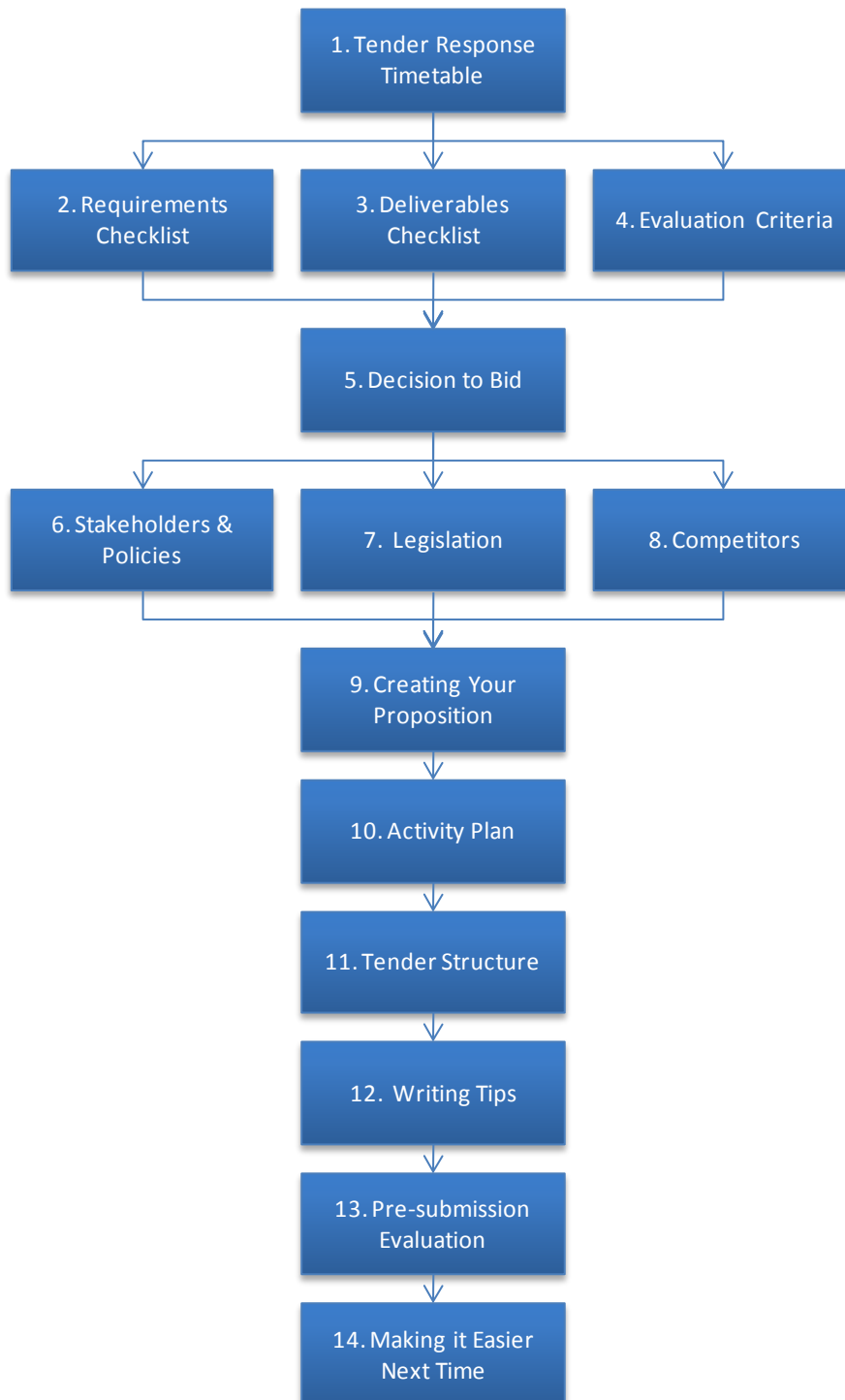
So you have proposed exactly what was specific and you are awarded the contract but the project does not go as well as expected. Not an uncommon situation. To identify what went wrong and learn from the experience an independent consultant is commissioned by the PSO to evaluate the project. As part of the evaluation the consultant confirms the PSO procured what was specified in the appropriate way but was surprised to find the work was contracted to an organisation that had no previous experience of delivering this type of project. You can imagine the difficulty this will cause the PSO. What this means for you is that as part of your tender you need to demonstrate successful experience of delivering the same type of work, to the same type of customer in the same geographic area. If you cannot do this you will need to partner to fill any gaps.

Scale

The final risk management issue for the PSO is one of scale. Typically PSOs like to place contracts with organisations where the project represents between 5-30% of their annual turnover. Why? The answer is simple. If the project is too small a proportion of the providers' turnover, the PSO as a customer may not be strategically important. If the contract is too large a proportion of the provider's turnover, then they may be over exposed. Either way they will not be in a position to exert sufficient control over the provider. If the provider is too large it will be difficult for the PSO to exert pressure to get what they want. If the provider is too small the cost of putting right any problems might be beyond their capacity.

2. PROPOSAL WRITING PROCESS

The diagram below shows the key steps in the proposal writing process. Developing a structured process will help improve the quality of the tenders you write and hence your overall success.



If you want help in developing a structured process for your business, including process templates then please contact us at enquiries@tenders-uk.org.

3. PROPOSAL WRITING TIPS

This section focuses on responding to questions and structuring your response (where the response format is left open) in a manner that:

- **Demonstrates** your understanding of the client's requirements
- **Convinces** the client that there is no reason not to select you as the preferred supplier
- **Persuades** the client to choose you

The Golden rule

When answering the questions use an appropriate, consistent and coherent structure. The best structured questions will:

- Address the question / requirement
- Provide examples that demonstrate similar value, scope and clients
- Include positive feedback from previous clients
- Include benefits and added value

Your responses should be structured in a way that allows the evaluator to read easily. These tips refer to the presentational aspects of your response.

Use of Sections

Be clear about the purpose of each section of text – what is its function in the document? Put down a statement of this purpose and use it at the start of the section. Use sub-headings to identify and manage areas of information

Use of Paragraphs

Keep paragraphs short with no longer than 10 lines. Do not crowd too many ideas in one paragraph. Make each paragraph a distinct and consistent step in the sequence of information. Link paragraphs to each other to bring out the logic of the text. Consider whether bullet points work better than a paragraph.

Use of sentences

Know how each sentence is going to end before you write it down or key it in! Keep sentences short, making a single, precise point or a group of related statements linked as clauses. Long sentences only work if their structure is clear – don't ramble or make them convoluted. Every sentence has a part to play in reinforcing the logic of the text, be precise. If you don't state clearly what you mean clients will assume you don't know what you want to say.

Writing for Impact

Now that you have worked on structure, you now want to adopt a writing style that is convincing and persuasive and demonstrates understanding of what the client requires. In this section we will work together

to structure the perfect response. The image you need to create is a responsible, dynamic and confident supplier. Your writing will inevitably position your company in the client's mind.

Demonstrating understanding

Cover all the requirements providing solutions and insight. Respond appropriately to the directions provided: outline, describe and explain. Make sure that you provide an answer for each and every question that the client has asked. Stick to the question asked; do not make up an answer because you feel it's closely related to the question. Be direct and confident in your answers. Words such as outline, describe and explain have specific meanings for you to action.

Choose the right words

- Use your company rather than the first person to respond to questions.
- Consider an integrated, seamless text that conveys a single voice of your company. This will add to a much more businesslike bid.
- After you have written an answer read it again and assess where you can improve on your choice of words and phrases. It might be handy to have a thesaurus. Use the corporate plan to understand the cultural language and vision of the client.
- There is never just one way of saying something – make the point straightforward.
- Look away from the word, focus on the sense of what you want to communicate.
- The more clear and simple your words are, the more value you add to the bid.
- Grammar, spelling and sentence structure express professional quality.
- Vary the sentence structure; avoid conveying a sense of monotony.
- Don't write hesitantly or vaguely, clients want confident contractors.
- Write positively 'will' rather than 'would' and avoid too many conditionals.
- Avoid insensitive remarks and stick to politically correct statements.
- Make sure your tables and your text match – use references and numbers.

Incorporate the 5 Cs

- **Correctness:** getting wordings, data and details right are essential
- **Consistency:** style and phrasing reinforce quality of the bid and position you favourably
- **Conciseness:** provide clear and comprehensive information
- **Continuity:** make sure points are made in a logical manner and link without gaps
- **Coordination:** avoid inconsistencies, especially if a team is putting the bid together

Adding value

Adding value means bringing something to the arrangement that is genuinely beyond the client's capability or capacity. This can occur at three levels:

1. Business benefits: identify new opportunities that will benefit the client
2. Capacity / Capabilities: infusing new skills, methods and capability in service delivery
3. Economy: better, more efficient economies of scale and rationalisation

Therefore whilst writing your bid, communicate these client benefits by turning your strength into clear value add to the client:

- Benefits: create a summary of benefits, it will demonstrate that you are able to view the contract from the client's standpoint and identify with their priorities
- Competitive advantages: show your strengths provide the client with products and services that are sustainable, measurable, accessible and unique
- Culture: align your company closely with the client's beliefs, aspirations and mission statements

Your bid should communicate to the client that your offerings are competitive in terms of technical quality and value for money. Your bid also has to possess an extra dimension from that of your competitors that sets you apart, a distinctive edge that represents the benefits you are uniquely placed to offer.

Think back to the specification - as a bidder what are you bringing that is original and productive to the client?

Innovation, creativity and value do not necessarily need to be focused on the specific product or service that you intend to provide. There are other ways to demonstrate value. In this section we will cover some of these.

Reduce client's risk

Risk is not only related to the value of the contract. Most clients will also consider aspects of risk such as risk of reputation and risk to clients. Make it clear in your bid that you understand the risks inherent in the contract and share the client's concern to mitigate or manage the risks. A constructive response from your part showing how you will secure efficient delivery and explaining the mechanism you can apply to risk management will win you marks.

Focus on your people

The professional strengths that you propose in your bid can be of rich value to the client, particularly when quality of people for the work is an important criterion in the contract award. Redraft staff CVs to suit the client's specifications. Think of ways to use professional capabilities to provide additional benefits.

Emphasise processes

Your bid needs to reflect creative ways of devising methods, procedures and systems that will benefit your client. These need to be presented as opportunities for the client to achieve value for money, generating efficiencies and savings or gain additional revenue.

Professionalism (added value)

There may be aspects of your approach that the client will see as representing particular benefits such as an emphasis on:

- Innovation, green issues and quality assurances
- Informed and reliable services
- Responsive an to changing requirements
- Partnering and sharing information

- Concerns for efficient working relationships
- Procedures for performance monitoring
- Progress measurements and reporting

Creating an Executive Summary

An executive summary is usually included when the form of tender has not been prescribed. Your executive summary should do the following:

- A summary of the client's needs, key drivers that created those needs and insights into the benefits of the resulting product or service being tendered for
- A summary of your organisations past experience and skills in this area and how you provided benefits. Be proud and credible
- A closing summary of how your organisation would approach this particular project and the benefits that you would aim to provide to the client

Cross referencing and checking for completeness

A complete and thorough response convinces the reader that you are a credible and reliable supplier. Use your tender response checklist to ensure that you have responded to all the requirements and included all the requested deliverables.

- Step 1. Use the requirements checklist in your tender response checklist
- Step 2. Use the deliverables checklist in your tender response checklist to ensure that you have included all the deliverables
- Step 3. Ensure all the items in your to-do list have been completed or at the very least you are happy all the important activities have been covered
 - Check the requirements that you have responded to
 - Check the deliverables that you have completed