

Write Backwards! Win Bids

Most proposals don't sell as well as they could, because most people write them the wrong way round. They start with their product or service and work hard turning every feature into a customer benefit. The intention is right, but the approach is wrong.

MatchPoint helps organisations win bids, proposals and tenders. We harvest and build best practice, and provide our clients with expert resources, skills coaching and more effective ways to win. This tip will help make winning easier.

The problem is that benefits don't hang off products. They live in the customer's heart. You can't find real benefits by staring at products, you have to look deep inside the customer. This may seem a harder thing to do, but fortunately there is an easy way through. The answer lies in a little known fact – there are only 3 kinds of benefit.

This truth shows up most clearly in the simplest and purest market in the world, the stock market. Millions of transactions are made in the blink of any eye on the strength of three things, and three things only – return, risk, and future options.

Think about this. More of what you want (return), less doubt or uncertainty (risk), and more or better opportunities for the future (options). That's all we are chasing in anything we buy. We may choose one make of vacuum cleaner over another because it works faster and saves us time (greater return). Or we might go for an established brand because it makes us feel more secure (less risk). Or we might pick another model because it could be upgraded to a steam clean capability - just in case we might want to do that, later on (better options).

From a vacuum cleaner to a fleet of aeroplanes, there are only three types of benefit. Remember that. Just three types of benefit, for any transaction. Ever.

So the key to a powerful proposal is to start by working out what combination of these motivators drives the customer's decision makers. Decision makers behave very differently in different situations. If they are in the board room, or trying to protect their department's budget, or being faced with making a career-threatening decision, their behaviour will be shaped by very different things. This holds true whatever you are selling.

And searching for benefits in this way can move mountains – mountains of product, that is. For more than a decade, thousands of people bought millions of computers because 'No one ever got fired for buying IBM'. The main motivator? Not technical superiority, not low cost, but personal risk reduction.

So start your proposal by drawing up three boxes on a piece of paper, labelled 'return', 'risk' and 'options'. Then think what's really driving this customer's decision makers. And keep them in front of you, keep aiming at them for as long as you are writing your proposal. The proposal that wins is the one that offers most perceived value to the customer. But you should begin where most people try to end – with the benefits. Don't talk about your product and hope you can squeeze out some meaningful benefits by the time you stop writing. Identify the benefits the customer really craves. There are only three of them. Find these first - and then start your proposal.

Do it the opposite way to most people, write backwards.