

### **Just Answer the Question: How so many Outsourcers fall short in their bid responses.**

I have become my father. Not only do I increasingly resemble him, but I find myself giving my children exactly the kind of advice he gave me. Recently, as they left each morning for their end of year exams, I told them to read every question carefully, take their time to understand it and answer the question that's asked. "You'll get no marks for not answering the question at all, and no marks either for giving the wrong answer".

It's the same piece of advice I would give to any outsourcer who asked me how to win business. I have, over the years, read many, many bid responses, and also worked with a number of outsourced service providers in developing and writing responses to tenders. Not answering the question that's asked is easily the greatest mistake that they all make.

When I am assessing bids on behalf of a client, I use a scoring matrix, each item of which is directly linked to a question on the Request for Proposal. When I have maybe six responses, each one of 100 or more pages, to read, I want to enjoy reading them. I like to see what outsourcers can do for my client, and how they can provide better service to my client's customers. Yet I continually find myself frustrated, and regularly shouting out loud (to myself) 'just answer the damn question!'

Not answering the question takes many forms. Obviously giving a completely irrelevant answer is the principal one. More infuriating, however, is the general response to a specific question. This takes many forms - the essay, in which the respondent tells me about the importance of, say, quality monitoring in ensuring great customer service, and the importance they place on it, but doesn't answer my question as to how they will manage said quality for my particular client. Equally annoying is the bland answer, in which they give such a lengthy, general response to the question that it's impossible to pick out the real meat in the answer. Worst of all is the attachment – where, for example, a question on training is answered by the inclusion of a thirty page call centre training document that is not necessarily relevant to the particular client requirement, but was used for a previous client with whom they are probably having a satisfactory working relationship. All of these responses will be lucky to score 5 out of 10 in my book, and frequently score a lot less.

Similarly, when outsourced providers bring me in to help them with their responses, I am often presented with documents where the above has happened. Recently, a client asked me to rate their response to a tender out of 10, and was greatly disturbed when I gave it a 3. Once they had calmed down, much frantic re-writing followed, focused on answering the question. Between us, we pulled it out of the bag, and they were awarded the contract a couple of months ago.

I know why this happens. Outsourcers are busy. Most people involved in contributing to the bid response have other jobs, and don't necessarily have the time or inclination to provide a quality response to their section. They often provide an answer that was given to a previous bid where the question was similar but not the same. The bid manager has to collate all the inputs, and develop a solution – with the same written feel throughout - to the specific client requirement, whilst ensuring everyone from the IT director to the operations director and the finance director

## Winning Outsourced Tender Responses

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are happy with it. They often have a number of bids to balance at the same time. Many outsourcers see the bid management role as a non-revenue-generating role and it is given limited personnel or financial support. In many cases, it's a miracle that a response gets out on time at all, never mind one that is well written and properly answers the questions. It's not an easy job.

I firmly believe that if outsourcers took the time to focus on the quality of their responses, rather than the quantity or size, they would generate better responses and find themselves with a better chance of winning business. In my view, there is no point in bidding for a piece of business if your organisation is not going to give it 100%. I often tell outsourcers that they would be better off bidding for fewer pieces of business, and giving each bid a lot more effort.

So when I'm asked how to win business with bids, my first piece of advice echoes my father all those years ago: 'Answer the question that's asked'. Not all my father's advice was as good as this, however. He once told me that no matter how much study I did, I'd always feel come exam time that I could have done more. On the strength of this, I did nothing at all for the first term, and ended up having to come back from my working holiday in the US to do a repeat.

Thanks, Dad!

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*comments or thoughts on this article, please contact me at:*

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