It Is Proposal Strategies that Really Underpin a Competitive GovCon Win

Influencing the RFP

You lose the opportunity to shape an upcoming Government Contracting (GovCon) Request-for-Proposal (RFP) if you do not attempt to meet with the customer early and often. Shaping means:

- ❏ Playing to your strengths
- ❏ Minimizing/eliminating your weaknesses
- ❏ Minimizing/eliminating competitor strengths
- ❏ Creating/increasing competitor weaknesses

Shaping an RFP is a team sport. It should involve all the key players:

- ❏ Executive management
- ❏ Business development
- ❏ Contracts
- ❏ Capture Manager
- ❏ Intended Program Manager
- ❏ Technical Subject Matter Experts (as appropriate)
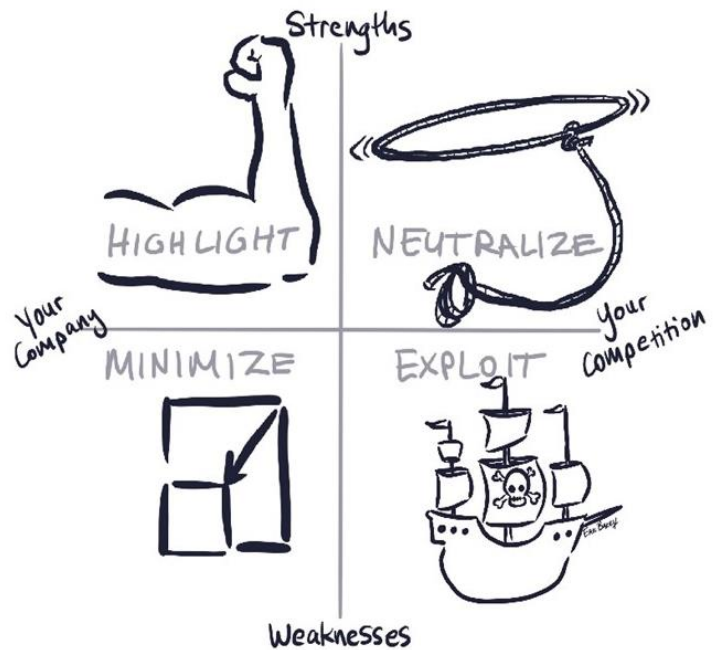
Attempt to influence the RFP in your direction. Do this before the competition shapes it in their direction to your detriment. Areas to influence include the following:

- ❏ Acquisition plan (e.g., use of your company's contractual vehicle)
- ❏ Requirements
- ❏ Evaluation criteria
- ❏ Adjustments to the solicitation process that could be favorable to your company (e.g., orals if you are the incumbent or due diligence if you are not the incumbent.)

Section M of the RFP lists the factors the government uses to compare each bid. It specifies which factors are the most important to them. Maximize your win potential by understanding the weighting of specific bid components, such as the technical approach, personnel, and price. This insight allows you to tailor your proposal response to score the most points.

You can win in the pre-solicitation phase. To do this, engage the customer early in the phase to convince them to move toward what your company offers. Adjust your proposed solution as needed once the customer releases a final solicitation. It is also key to move the customer's impression of the competition away from what the customer wants. This is competitive ghosting in the proposal phase. Note: Use customer calls to help shape the requirements. Present your views on what it will take to make the program a success. Link your views on success to your unique qualifications. Influence evaluation criteria to play to your strengths.

Also, influence the procurement method (e.g., best value versus lowest price technical acceptable [LPTA] bidder). Use white papers to address aspects of your approach. Identify and reach out to as many stakeholders as possible. Build effective responses to Requests for Information (RFIs) and draft RFPs. This helps build positive perceptions with the customer about your company. All these together help influence aspects of the final RFP (e.g., proposal format, scope of work, and evaluation factors and weights).

Ghosting

Leverage ghosting. This means using information about the competition to win. "Ghosts" can be more or less visible, depending on your degree of competitor context. Context of the customer, program, and competition should be correct and current. Otherwise ghosting will not be effective. Convince evaluators to choose your company and not the competition. Do this by applying one of six proposal strategies across the integrated solution set:

1) Highlight your company's strengths.
2) Minimize your company's weaknesses.
3) Neutralize the likely competitors' strengths.
4) Highlight the likely competitors' weaknesses.
5) Counter how a likely competitor could exploit your weakness.
6) Counter how a likely competitor could neutralize your strength.

Again, the solution is not only technical. It is an integrated set of items bounded by context of the customer, program, and the competition that also includes:

- ❑ Team (i.e., Prime and Teaming Partners)
- ❑ Past Performance
- ❑ Leadership Team (i.e., Key Personnel)
- ❑ Management Approach
- ❑ Methods, Processes, Tools, and Techniques
- ❑ Staffing Solution
- ❑ Price-to-Win (PTW) and Basis-of-Estimate (BOE)

To applying discriminators, analyze trade-offs between aspects of your approach versus that of the competition. Then ghost the competition. Achieving a balance between two desirable but incompatible features results in a trade-off. For example, let's assume your approach has a lower cost with new technology. Whereas the competition's approach has a higher cost and older technology. The competition's conservative approach is less risky than your proposed breakthrough approach. This is because you must develop your offering while the competition's is available. In your proposal, you would emphasize the big payoff and less cost for the customer. Seek to neutralize the subject of risk and counter the fact that you must develop your solution. Note: Use neutralization and countering when you cannot close any gaps that you have.

Ghost discriminators during all phases of the business lifecycle, particularly during capture, pre-proposal activities, and proposal development. Also, leverage the customer's organizational chart and statement-of-work. They are tools to support the development of proposal strategy statements for ghosting.

There are two types of ghosting: "Big G" and "Little g." "Big G" ghosting is characterized as follows:

- ❑ It occurs before final RFP release and before the customer/procurement office goes silent..
- ❑ It is completed by thinking and talking.
- ❑ It takes time. It involves talking to decision-makers, influencers, and participants. The intent is to subconsciously affect their thinking about the procurement.
- ❑ It has the most impact.

"Little g" ghosting, on the other hand, looks like this:

- ❑ It is done after the final RFP release when you are preparing the proposal.
- ❑ It is completed by thinking and writing.
- ❑ It has less impact than "Big G" ghosting, but it is still critical. Start as early as possible so you can get the benefits of "Big G" ghosting. (And never say your competitor's name!

Ghosting is most effective when positive in nature. For example, cite a key factor as important when you know that a competitor does not have it.

Apply your proposal strategies to your value statements. This is the best way to ghost the competition in your response.

Note: Ghosting is an essential part of winning a competitive government bid. Yet, it is most important to first address the requirements of your proposal. Do not get caught up in ghosting too much at the expense of addressing requirements.

Proposal Strategy Statements

Proposal strategy statements support ghosting in the design of integrated solution set components. Take your management approach as an example. Assume your competitor has a history of being within budget. Yet, you have a recent project over budget. In the response, you might say: "We mitigate our weakness by citing lessons learned from a project with a cost overrun." Early in the proposal planning phase, write a list of the solutions you will ghost. What you emphasize in your proposal should relate to one or more of the following:

- ❑ Teaming partners
- ❑ Past performance
- ❑ Leadership team
- ❑ Technical/management approaches
- ❑ Methods, processes, and tools
- ❑ Staffing
- ❑ PTW/BOE

Check each off as you address them in the response. For example, for a technical approach strength, you could state, "Show our existing development/test lab. It is already available at contract start."

Show evidence of how you addressed each proposal strategy statement with success. This results from "solutioning" the different components of the integrated solution set. For example, you might say, "Show photos of our existing dedicated development/test lab. It is ready for the customer to use."

Below is a more complete set of examples of proposal strategies that go across the integrated solution set:

- ❑ **Team**

    - *"Show we are not a weak prime. Yet, still show that we bring recognized and respected teaming partners. Plus, with sound professional customer relationships."*
    - *"Show how each partner on the team neutralizes each incumbent teaming partner. Do this on a one-to-one basis."*

- ❑ **Past Performance**

    - *"Show how we are a rock-solid systems integrator. Do so by showing our successful record of advising the government on ERP systems."*
    - *"Show our successful experience working in a concurrent service provider environment. Emphasize our design, development, implementation, maintenance, and operations experience on many different applications."*

- ❑ **Leadership Team**

    - *"Ensure key personnel have done related work on similar contracts. Emphasize contract size, scope, and complexity."*
    - *"Show that our leadership team has knowledge of the customer's environment. Emphasize processes and systems (new and legacy), infrastructure, and programs."*

- **Technical Approach**

  - *"Show how our solution is more_____"*
    - *Compliant*
    - *Open*
    - *Secure*
    - *Modular*
    - *Interoperable*
    - *Affordable*
    - *Integrated*
    - *Proven*
  - *"Show how our solution provides a better roadmap to future modernization."*

- **Management Approach**

  - *"Show how we are better at transitioning similar programs. Emphasize program size, scope, and complexity. Focus on fast ramp-up, knowledge transfer, and business continuity."*
  - *"Show that we have a better strategy for co-existing with the incumbent team."*

- **Methods, Processes, Tools, and Techniques**

  - *"Show how our application of existing customer methods and tools is innovative." Emphasize the benefits the customer receives."*
  - *"Show how our application requirements management is better than the incumbent's."*

- **Staffing Solution**

  - *"Show that we have ready staff trained and practiced in Oracle. Emphasize that they cover development, maintenance and operations, and enhancements."*
  - *"Make a credible/defensible BOE by using full-time-equivalent (FTE) ratios. This means what measurable work an FTE performs within a specified time. Link metric volumes to staffing levels/skill mix and resource estimates."*

- **PTW and BOE**

  - "*Show our rationale for staffing levels throughout the project to justify our price."*
  - *"Our pricing solution must align with the execution of project requirements. Show a decrease in project cost over time. Emphasize how our solution results in a transformed customer organization. Call out incremental and iterative delivery of value."*

Do not forget. Ghost in one or more of six ways when developing proposal strategy statements.

Adherents of the **Solution Engineering Framework™** all know this key point from experience. Sound win themes are essential to a competitive government procurement but insufficient. Timely application of "Big G" and "Little g" proposal strategy statements is a must. Do this across the integrated solution set to make a real difference.

Remember, each key competitor will be ghosting the other competitors. Ghost the competition in a way that educates the customer. Make them think about what they should consider and why it is important. Do it in a way that makes your company look desirable. Also, do it in a way without criticizing or putting down the competition in an open manner. Always remember to be professional.

The Problem

Very often companies do not have a "visual blueprint", as well as a digital thread of the upfront work essential to formulating their proposal strategies. This means that there is not any traceable, irrefutable, defensible, and explainable evidence to support their proposal strategies, particularly in

the eyes of the company's C-Suite (e.g., Chief Growth Officer). This results in the company not taking the right actions, which lower win probability and squander internal company resources and time.

The Need

There is a need for a capability to help GovCon companies to perform the necessary analyses to help properly formulate proposal strategies. In fact, there is a need for a capture-as-a-service (CaaS) capability where such things and more are possible, particularly in today's post-pandemic hybrid work environment. Such a CaaS offering should be collaborative; analytical; strategy; solution; and customer/company value-focused.

The Benefits

The benefits of such a CaaS capability are that it would be able to:

- ❑ Support the post-pandemic hybrid work environment.
- ❑ Help do necessary "strategic thinking before writing" in opportunity assessment, capture, and proposal planning phases of competitive pursuits.
- ❑ Enable better executive decision-making by providing quantitative status on the goodness of business development and capture efforts, as well as readiness for recompete.
- ❑ Help answer most important question when pursuing a competitive bid. *"Why your company?"*
- ❑ Be authoritative source-of-truth for a competitive bid.
- ❑ Support design and development of solution for your competitive response.
- ❑ Generate needed strategies and strengths to win bid.
- ❑ Store rich context of how and why a deal was bid—Company-internal data lake of competitive intelligence for future reference.
- ❑ Capture company's intellectual capital with each use to enable future growth.
- ❑ Act as a living capture plan. In the traditional sense, a capture plan is a framework—a series of folders or buckets where you assemble and organize data by topic.
- ❑ Quantify growth status of your enterprise.
- ❑ Lower cost of capturing new business.
- ❑ Protect customer business you already have.
- ❑ Increase value of company in the eyes of potential buyers.

Remember, You Cannot Have the Proposal Strategies to Win a Competitive GovCon Pursuit, Unless You Conduct the Necessary Upfront Analyses

We believe that if such a CaaS offering existed in the GovCon marketspace that companies using it would win more competitions and increase their overall enterprise value. For this reason, we have developed a capture-as-a-service offering for the GovCon marketspace for its use, which provides the aforementioned benefits and more.

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