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## How To Write A Terrible Federal Proposal: Five Steps To Ensure Disaster

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A note about the publisher of  
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Headquartered in Newton, MA, PSMJ offers more than 150 titles in book, audio, and video and publishes two newsletters on A/E/C firm management. PSMJ also produces the industry's preeminent annual surveys on management salaries, financial performance and fees and pricing.

## HOW TO WRITE A TERRIBLE FEDERAL PROPOSAL: FIVE STEPS TO ENSURE DISASTER

*By Dave and Andrew Alexander*

Writing a winning proposal in response to a federal RFP is grueling. The proposal manager has to juggle dozens of issues and keep a constant eye to how the proposal can be further improved.

Under the pressure of tight deadlines, even experienced proposal managers can forget to be vigilant in guarding against downside risks, and can allow strategic or tactical mistakes to occur. In our experience, making any of the following five errors will guarantee the failure of your proposal.

**1. Criticize the RFP.** Early in my career (the first author), I worked for a large and successful consulting firm. My boss assigned me to proofread a soon-to-be submitted proposal. The first paragraph sported a footnote. This struck me as odd, because my instinct was that footnotes are for term papers, not proposals.

The RFP is organized incorrectly, the footnote asserted, and our proposal would present material in a different, and “better,” order. To underscore our obviously superior knowledge of how to structure a proposal, the footnote included a helpful matrix. Clearly the panel would see that our bold, new approach reflected creativity on our part — “out of the box” thinking.

Out of the box, indeed. After reading the footnote, each member of the evaluation panel probably wrote us off as either arrogant or naïve.

After we lost, my boss was humbled. “I blew it,” he conceded. “We shouldn’t have started the proposal by kicking them.”

How many times have we all seen an RFP that was poorly organized — with duplicative, overlapping, or even contradictory instructions? To be successful, we have to find a way to respond to the RFP’s instructions without complaints and in a way that does not translate on paper into the equivalent of a patronizing sigh.

**2. Assume the RFP is fresh and on target.** Many proposal writing teams fatally assume that the RFP is fresh, up-to-date, and will reflect the client organization's current priorities and needs. Here's why it generally won't:

- A federal RFP usually is drafted long before it is issued to accommodate the government's long internal approval process.
- An RFP typically is written piecemeal by many separate agency staff members, and is stitched together at the last minute. Cohesion suffers accordingly.
- Persons assigned to write an RFP often take shortcuts — for example, by cutting and pasting material from an old RFP.

Do not rely on the RFP for an accurate, up-to-date depiction of the problems to be solved. A savvy firm does its homework, gains a strong sense of the client organization's current, most pressing issues, and reflects that understanding throughout the proposal.

**3. Assume your client references will be stellar.** Proposal managers can be tempted to skip the vetting of client references due to time pressures. He or she may list an "Old Faithful" group of client references. Then the nightmare occurs: it turns out that some of these references are no longer enamored with the firm.

We tell our clients to vet their references — each time, for each proposal. If necessary, we'll do the checking for them. Here are some of the responses we've received. (We'll refer to this client as "Acme."):

"I would never do business with Acme again. Their current project with me has gone south."

"Yeah, Acme does a workmanlike job. Frankly, we typically pick Acme for our less complex jobs, because we know that they will give us a really low price. But we can't vouch for their abilities on a large, complex project."

"Acme was great in the old days. But their recent work has been subpar, and we just fired the guy at our company who was our liaison with them.

He wasn't being candid about how bad things were getting."

**4. Brag** — and use clichés while you're at it. Nobody likes a braggart. Don't waste the evaluation panel's time by making vacuous statements such as:

"Our firm is world-class."

"We have a unique combination of skills that cannot be matched by any other competitor."

"Our proposed lead technical person is the best in her field."

If your proposal employs such clichés, evaluation panel members will invariably roll their eyes. Even worse, some members of the panel might prefer to do the work in-house. They may view the RFP as necessary only because the agency is understaffed, not because their colleagues lack the required expertise. Any bragging can be taken as a subtle dig at the agency's own personnel.

So accentuate the positive, but do so with cold, hard facts that document your firm's capabilities, strengths, and experience. Include examples of tangible results you have achieved for clients. If there is any cheerleading to be done, let it be displayed in excerpts from client testimonials. But don't brag on your own account.

**5. Lie.** Do not doom your proposal by telling outright lies about your firm, its experience, or the credentials of your staff members. You will not be able to keep these fibs straight, and evaluation panel members have an amazing propensity for ferreting out inconsistencies. If by some miracle you slip by and win the competition — good luck getting sleep for the next 10 years. It's not nice to lie to the federal government. Proposal discrepancies can quickly lead into the realm of civil or criminal investigations. Do the right thing: tell the truth in your proposals.

**Dave and Andrew Alexander of Lincoln Strategies, LLC, help firms enter or expand within government markets. They have helped many A/E firms develop strategies for and write federal proposals. Contact Dave Alexander at [dave.alexander@LincStrat.com](mailto:dave.alexander@LincStrat.com) or by phone at 978-369-1140.**