

Chapter 7

The proposal life cycle

You can't close the sale when you have not made the sale.

LET'S NOW TAKE A CLOSER look at what proposals really are, how they fit into a small business's total marketing life cycle, and the important planning, decisions, knowledge products, organization, and reviews required to prepare a successful proposal.

7.1 What is a proposal in the competitive federal and commercial marketplace?

Technically, a proposal is an offer prepared by a contractor (such as your company) to perform a service, supply a product, or a combination of both in response to an RFP or RFS document or *Commerce Business Daily* SF254/255 synopsis issued by a procuring agency. Proposals are legal documents, often incorporated by reference into the final contract. That

means that they must be factual and accurate—including information provided in résumés and project summaries.

A proposal is designed to sell both technical and managerial capabilities of a company to accomplish all required activities on time and at a reasonable cost. Your company's proposal document(s) is scored, literally,¹ by the client's evaluators against formalized, specific standards. A proposal is the written, electronic, or oral (or any combination of the three) result of informed thinking, knowledge assimilation, and marketing processes, supported in turn by hard and directed work and buoyed by a positive collective attitude within your company's proposal team. A proposal is, first and foremost, a sales document. To be sure, it includes a host of technical, programmatic, institutional, pricing, and certification information, but it must remain sales oriented.

A proposal involves marketing your company to a government, private-sector, or international client. It is a closing sales presentation, supported concretely by traceable and auditable credentials and tailored to persuade your client to select your company for the award because you are best-qualified to achieve the results your client wants to achieve [1]. In the words of a senior U.S. DOT official, write your proposal from the government COTR's perspective. Help him or her to feel comfortable that your company will meet schedules, budgets, and other performance parameters. Demonstrate that you understand and can function well in the COTR's world. Make the COTR want to link his professional fate with your company. A proposal is, necessarily, continued dialogue with your client. Proposals are, in fact, the primary vehicle for winning new federal government business in the competitive arena.

A proposal is a closing sales presentation, presented persuasively and supported concretely by traceable and auditable credentials.

To reiterate, a proposal (as well as a bid, that is, a response to an IFB) is an offer or response [2]. A proposal is not necessarily a contractual document. But under specific circumstances, an offer can be made into a contract by the government. The client uses your proposal and those of your competitors as the primary sources of information upon which to base their selection of a winning contractor. Government evaluators are in no way obligated or encouraged to review publicly available material about your company that is not included within your proposal. That means that you have to ensure that all relevant and salient materials are included along with your proposal within the parameters of any page or font limitations.

1 Scoring can take the form of numeric scores, color-coded scores, pluses and minuses, or qualitative (adjectival) narrative comments.

To continue, a proposal is a package of carefully orchestrated and documented arguments. Nothing should be put into your proposal by accident! Each section of a proposal should present carefully constructed discussion and meaningful evidence to convince your client that you should be awarded the contract because of the superiority of what you are proposing. To do this, you have to support the following messages in writing:

- You understand your client's project requirements, critical issues, and success criteria.
- Your innovative, solutions-oriented approach satisfies all requirements (be careful not to imply that your approach exceeds requirements; this can result in the client thinking that you are proposing and charging for more than they are asking for).
- Your approach offers tangible benefits to the client.
- Your approach minimizes schedule, cost, and technical performance risk.
- You are better (that is, more reliable, more experienced, and less expensive) than your competitors.

Why us? Why not our competitors? These are the simple yet profound questions that internationally known and respected proposal consultant Hyman Silver² insists proposals must answer effectively. Through the vehicle of your proposal, your company must finish the process of convincing your client to select you over your competition.

Proposals are important deliverable products. One carelessly written and poorly presented proposal can damage your company's reputation with your client or potential client. Experience suggests that clients tend to remember contractors that have submitted inferior proposal responses. I have heard many senior managers say that they want to submit a proposal to "introduce the company to the client." If this is not a waste of B&P funds, nothing is. Introduce your company through marketing calls, leave-behind brochures, carefully tailored letters, or at industry trade shows and conferences. But do not expend the human, time, and financial resources to respond to a solicitation document unless you intend to win.

² This phrase was coined in 1975 by Hyman Silver, president of H. Silver and Associates (HSA) based in Los Angeles, California. Mr. Silver held senior engineer and marketing positions with McDonnell Douglas and Rockwell International before founding HSA.

7.2 Where does the proposal fit into the total marketing life cycle?

The proposal life cycle (in particular, for procurement efforts on which your company is the prime contractor) begins well before the actual writing and production of a response to an RFP. Figure 7.1 presents an overview of the entire marketing and proposal life cycle.

There are a number of salient elements in the overall contractor marketing and proposal process. The proposal process may include additional color team reviews. Please note that the concepts and processes introduced in the following items will be expanded in subsequent chapters of this book.

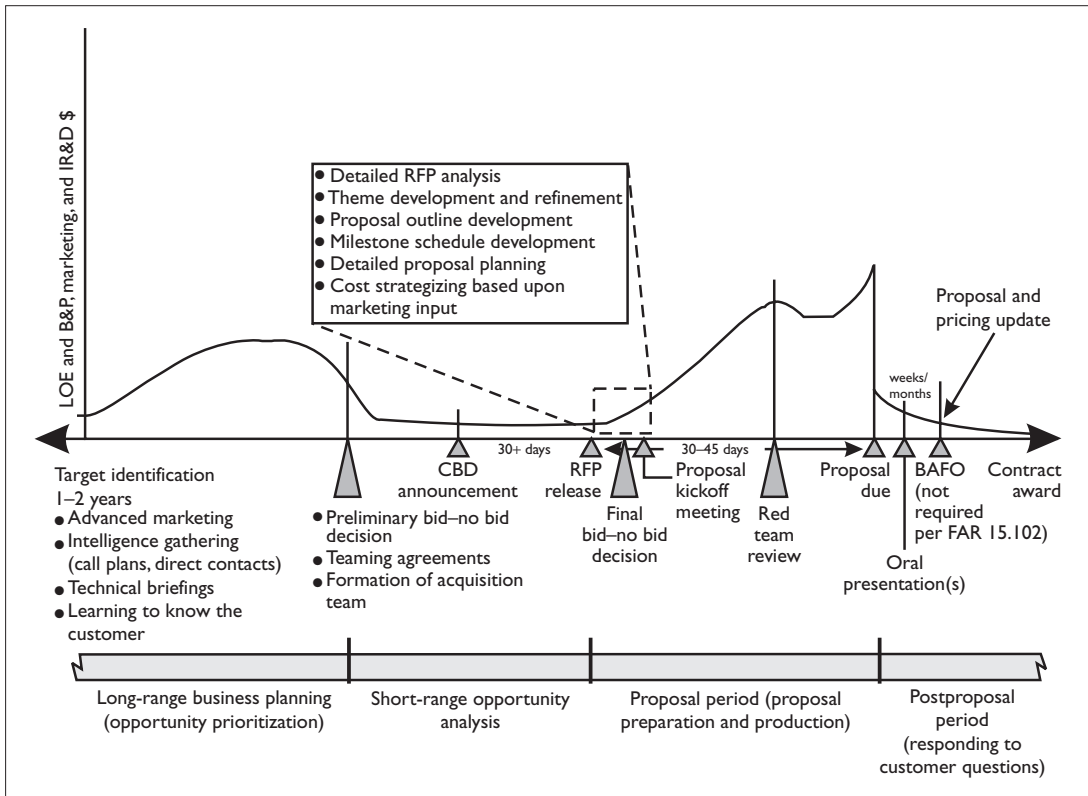


Figure 7.1 Overview of the marketing and proposal life cycle.

Long-term, preliminary marketing intelligence collection and direct client contact

- Presell the client on your company's qualifications and commitment to complete the job successfully. Create customer sentiment³ favorable to your company through technical briefings and discussions at various levels of the client's organization. Learn about such concerns as your client's technical requirements, financial concerns, scheduling issues, and decision-making processes. Verify that the project is a real, funded target.

For companies that provide support services, well-managed human talent and applicable contractual expertise are precisely what they are selling.

Formation of your company's acquisition team for a particular qualified procurement opportunity

- Assemble a small team of management, marketing, and technical staff that will meet on a regular basis to develop a capture plan and share information gleaned from client contacts conducted in accordance with the call plan. Themes, or sales messages, for your proposal should begin to emerge. Identify your company's competitive strengths and weaknesses. Identify staff and relevant project experience to be used in your upcoming proposal. For companies that provide support services, well-managed human talent and applicable contractual expertise are precisely what they are selling.
- Résumés and project descriptions (project or contract summaries) can be tailored and fine-tuned well in advance of the release of the RFP. Take the time to gather the kinds of detailed educational, certification, technical, and programmatic experience information that your clients normally require in their RFPs. Because staffing and past performance are critical evaluation factors in many RFPs, and because collecting specific information on staff and projects can require so much time, it is highly advisable to get started early. Build this information into your proposal knowledge base.

3 Hyman Silver coined the phrase.

Government's announcement of the procurement in the Commerce Business Daily (governed by FAR 5)

In some cases, your company must provide a written request to the appropriate government procuring agency for each particular RFP. Telephone or facsimile requests are generally not accepted. Increasingly, e-mail requests are acceptable. In addition, many RFPs are downloadable from government Web sites.

- The time to market your client for a particular project is drawing to a close. Once the RFP has hit the street, most agencies will not allow any marketing relevant to the project under competitive bid.

Release of the RFP by the specific government procuring agency

- If possible, arrange to physically pick up the RFP from the procuring agency. This will save several days delay in mailing time. Frequently, RFPs are available for downloading from client Web sites. For select procurements, your company will have to register with your client to obtain password access to the specific RFP posted on the client's Web site.

Government preproposal (bidders) conference

- Plan to attend the preproposal conference. If allowed, prepare questions for the client and submit them in writing in advance of the conference.
- Pay attention to client requirements that may be mentioned at the conference but not written in the RFP. Some conferences might include facility or site visits. Check in advance to see if photography is permitted and, if so, take relevant photos or video.

Final internal bid–no bid decision

- All such decisions should be made according to defined, structured business criteria and include (at a minimum) a member of senior management, the business development or advanced planning staff, the appropriate division manager, and the proposal manager.
- Good marketing intelligence will help to facilitate an appropriate decision.
- What is the probability of winning?
- Favorable financial return is an important consideration.

- Does your company have the people and facilities necessary to prepare a superior proposal and perform the project successfully?
- Does the project have potential strategic business advantages to your company?
- Teaming arrangements must be considered.
- Is your company the incumbent; if not, can you unseat the incumbent realistically?

Refer to Figure 7.2 for a representative bid–no bid decision matrix. Your company might use a total score of 75 to pursue a project.

Prekickoff planning meeting (conducted by the proposal manager)

It is often helpful for your company’s project managers (PMs) or program managers—the people who most likely will be called upon to serve as proposal managers—to envision the up-front proposal planning process in terms of deliverable products. These are very much analogous to the types of products that are integral to every program, project, task, and delivery order in your company’s contractual experience base. Just as every PM develops and adjusts staffing levels to meet changing requirements, generates project milestone schedules in accordance with the client’s requirements, and tracks project budgets to ensure cost control, so too must your proposal manager work with other staff in your company to develop a series of discrete products early in the proposal response life cycle, as shown in Figure 7.3. Particularly in very small companies, there may be insufficient overhead resources (nonbillable staff) available to maintain a proposal library or cybrary, provide proposal coordination support, assist with résumé and project summary development, and solidify teaming agreements. Those critical tasks must be accomplished by the proposal manager, and in a very limited time frame.

- Develop a detailed outline for each proposal volume, using RFP Sections L, M, C, and H, as well as the Contract Data Requirements List (CDRL), Data Item Descriptions (DIDs), and RFP attachments as appropriate. Take the time to assign responsible parties to each section. Allocate pages to each section in accordance with the relative weighting of Section M evaluation criteria. For example, if past performance will count for 20% of the total score and there is a 50-page limit to the proposal, plan on approximately 10 pages for the past performance section.

Date: _____ GO: _____ NO GO: _____ Client: _____ Project: _____ Prepared by: _____ Approved by: _____														
	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	Ranking	Comments	
Strategic relevance (how well does project fit company marketing strategy?)	Fits well with marketing strategy				Fits somewhat into the marketing strategy				Does not fit into marketing strategy					
Relationship with client	Close and excellent relationship with no problem projects				Fair or good relationship with some project problems				Strained relationship; problem project; selection questionable					
Knowledge of project	Strategic project/prior knowledge and marketing				Prior knowledge; no prior marketing				No prior knowledge or marketing					
Company staffing capabilities	Staff can perform all project requirements				Staff can perform most of the project requirements				Minimal or no staff capabilities					
Project competition	Competition manageable				Face formidable competition				Project wired for competition					
Company qualifications relative to competition	Technically superior; can demonstrate experience on similar contracts				Equivalent to competition; may have slight edge				Inferior to competition					
Potential for future work	Project will lead to future work				Possible future work				One-time project; no future work					
Profitability of project	Good profit potential				Moderate profit				Little profit					
Project schedule	More than adequate				Adequate				Not adequate					
Time, B&P costs, and resources to compete effectively for project	Favorable				Reasonable				Excessive					

Figure 7.2 A formalized bid–no bid decision matrix facilitates rational, business-based decision making.

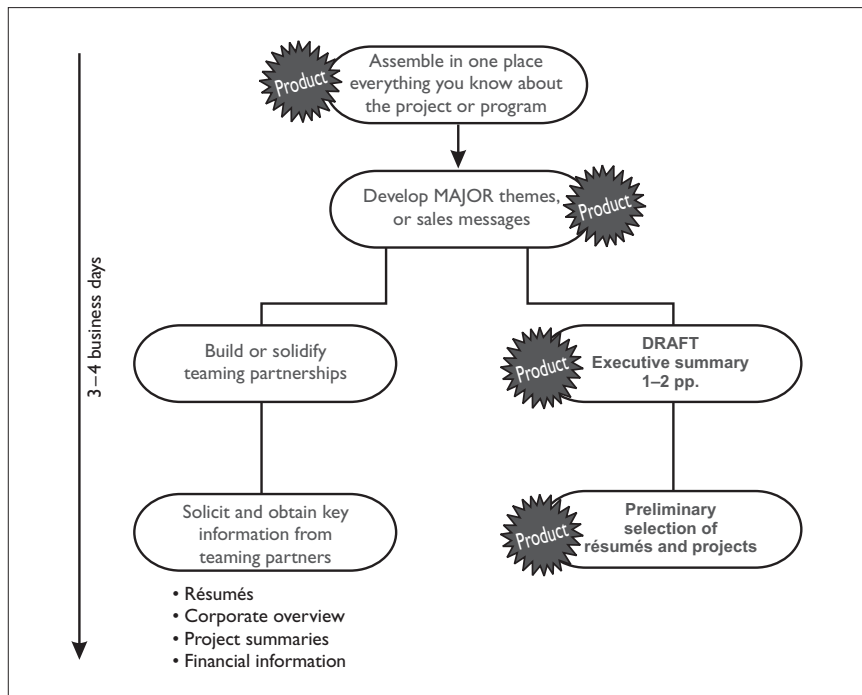


Figure 7.3
Critical prekickoff proposal products.

- Develop a workable proposal response milestone schedule that includes adequate writing, review, recovery, production, QC, and shipping time.
- Develop and modify existing proposal themes. Themes are conclusive and compelling reasons why the client should select your company over and above your competitors.
- Develop storyboards, scenarios, and scribble sheets.
- Select résumés and project summaries for the proposal.
- Generate a draft executive summary based upon your marketing intelligence and the evaluation factors found in Section M of the RFP. This will help to guide your writers to produce consistent, well-integrated narrative and graphics. Include graphics in your executive summary if at all possible. A full-color foldout page (11 × 17-in) that captures the technical and programmatic essence of your proposal is one high-impact way to sell the benefits of doing business with your company early in the proposal.
- Develop a preliminary design concept for the proposal volume covers.

- Identify critical supplies so that they can be ordered in advance (such as three-ring notebooks, special colored paper, customized tabbed divider pages, and specialized software⁴).

Proposal kickoff meeting [with subcontractor(s), if any] directed by the proposal manager

This meeting should be attended by senior management, appropriate marketing staff, the proposal manager, the proposal coordinator, all key technical staff who will be engaged in writing major sections of the proposal, key reviewers, a representative from contracts, and if necessary, a representative from human resources and a representative from publications.

- Emphasize team spirit, a winning attitude, and the support and interest of senior management.
- Distribute detailed technical, management, and cost volume outlines.
- Distribute DRAFT executive summary. Having a draft of the executive summary at this stage will help everyone involved in the proposal-writing process to better understand what the client expects. It will also help to establish the major strategic themes your company wants to integrate throughout the proposal.
- Share critical marketing intelligence about your client, and discuss key win strategies.
- Technical and management writing assignments are made, along with page limits and allocations (in accordance with Sections M and L of the RFP) and writing conventions (such as capitalization, hyphenation, and punctuation). Themes, critical issues of the project, and success criteria are explained to the writers. Clear responsibilities for action items will be assigned.
- Stipulate electronic file formats, software application and version, and file configuration control procedures.
- Assignments are made to contracts and human resources staff.
- Items that require the approval of senior management should be presented and finalized.
- Address the criticality of proposal security for both electronic and hardcopy versions of the resulting proposal documents.

4 Certain RFPs require that cost and technical volumes be submitted in specific software applications (e.g., Microsoft® Word®, Excel®, Corel® WordPerfect®, Lotus® 1-2-3®) and versions of those applications that your company may have to purchase.

Timely submission of first draft technical and management input to proposal manager (text and graphics), which should be prepared and produced in close association with the text

- Ongoing interaction and feedback between the proposal manager and the proposal writers are critical for developing a viable draft document quickly and efficiently.

Editing and review of technical and management input

Submission of technical and management input to publication group

- Ensure that electronic files are compatible.
- A secure intranet or firewalled File Transfer Protocol (FTP) site can be used for rapid file transfer from remote sites or teaming partners in other geographic locations.

The key is to use the Internet to transact business while simultaneously employing security technologies to ensure full confidentiality. IPsec is a standard that provides a common means of authentication, integrity, and Internet Protocol (IP) encryption. Corporations can save money as IPsec virtual private networks (VPNs) solutions are implemented. Their remote users can use the Internet via an ISP instead of dial-up lines to access the corporate network. Accessing a local ISP for connection and using IPsec for encryption can lower telephone charges and equipment costs significantly.

In addition, IPsec offers the ability to create virtual, protected links through the Internet to your customers, vendors, and other business partners. IPsec can be used to create trusted virtual work groups to help protect sensitive corporate data. For example, your business development department can be protected from other departments that do not have a need to know with respect to this department's confidential information. Or, employee records residing in the human resources department can be protected from unauthorized access.

Submittal of cost and staffing information to contracts

- It is critical to conceptualize and develop the cost volume in close association with the technical and management volumes (see Figure 7.4). Staffing selections, technical solutions, facilities and computer resources proposed, and your proposed management

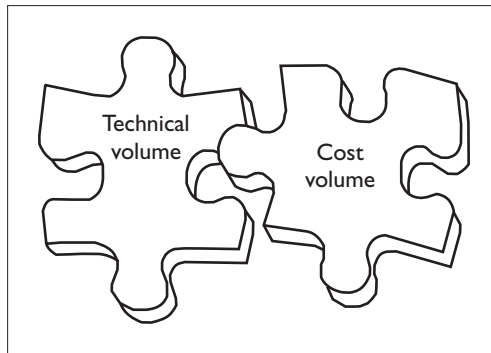


Figure 7.4
Develop the cost volume in close association with the technical volume.

plan and organizational structure can all have profound cost impacts. Proposal costing is sophisticated business, not mere number crunching. The key is to have financial staff with direct program or project experience who can interact appropriately and effectively with the technical proposal team.

Preparation of complete first technical or management draft with one master copy only

Proofing and review of first draft

- Entire document frozen 24 hours prior to Red Team review.

Red Team review of technical, management, and cost volumes (one to two days only)

Integration of all Red Team review comments (1 to 2 days) by proposal manager, selected technical staff, and the proposal coordinator (if needed)

Quality check of format and content by publication group

Preparation of second complete technical or management draft

Proofing and review of draft

Preparation of revised cost volume

Gold Team final review of technical, management, and cost volumes

- Entire document frozen 72 hours prior to final delivery to client.

Final production, integration of text and graphics, quality check, photoreproduction, collation, assembly, and preparation for delivery (3 days)

Signatures on cover letter and cost proposal forms (it is suggested that you purchase a stamp that reads ORIGINAL)

Final delivery

- Late proposals most likely will not be accepted by the government (see FAR 14.304). Even 1 minute past due is still late! Request, obtain, and archive a time- and date-stamped receipt.

Archiving of hard and electronic copy of proposal text and graphics in your corporate library

- These materials should be stored along with all of the marketing intelligence documents, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, competitor information, the original RFP and amendments, and other materials relevant to this procurement. Being able to easily retrieve this material, even months or years later, is critical if you are required to respond to Clarifications and Deficiencies (CRs & DRs), submit a BAFO, or deliver an oral presentation. This material should form the core of your proposal knowledge base.

Oral presentation defense, BAFO, and facilities inspection

- Certain agencies require that BAFO submittals or CRs and DRs be submitted as change pages to your original proposal submittal. Being able to retrieve your original submittal easily is a vital time saver.
- Take time to strategize and develop a powerful, well-rehearsed presentation.

Attend government debriefing when your company is an unsuccessful offeror and also when you win (see FAR 15.1003). Learn why you won.

Develop lessons learned and discuss with key proposal staff. Share lessons learned with other proposal managers.

7.3 Bid-no bid decision-making process

Being very selective with the procurements your company decides to pursue is a first step toward long-term proposal and general business development success. Careful selection of bid opportunities improves your proposal win ratio and maximizes the return on general and administrative (G&A) dollars your company has invested in the proposal effort (see Figure 7.5). Identifying sufficient high-dollar, high-probability opportunities for which your company is qualified is a necessary step prior to selection of particular targets. The essence of the bid-no bid downselection process relates to four primary factors.

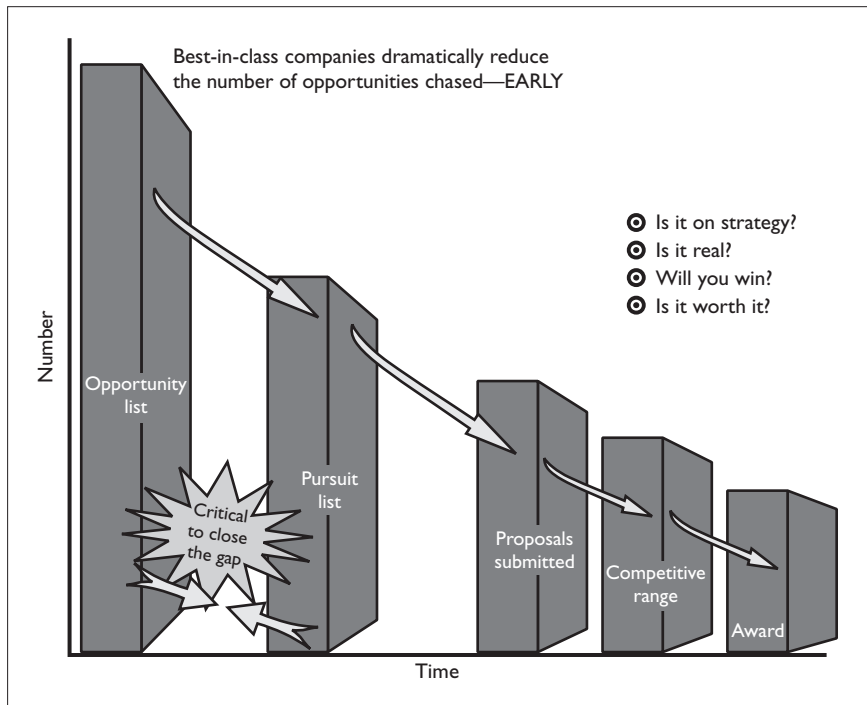


Figure 7.5
Downselect opportunities early.

- *The probability of winning.* Does the client know your company and does your company know the client? Is there an incumbent contractor? Is that contractor performing satisfactorily? What is the nature of the relationship between the incumbent and the client? Does marketing intelligence indicate that your company is in a favorable competitive position?
- *The reality of the procurement.* Will it receive funding and will the competition be genuine, or does the government really intend to retain the incumbent?
- *The desirability of obtaining the contract.* What are the profit expectations? Will the contract result in a strategic business advantage for your company, such as a foothold in a new geographic location or market sector? Will the procurement support your company's stated objectives as presented in your strategic plan and mission statement? What are the inherent risks and liabilities? What is the add-on or follow-on potential? Does the procurement require any up-front capital expenditure or cost sharing by your company? Will new staff have to be recruited and hired?
- *The necessary facilities, resources, and human talent to perform the work on schedule and within budget, as well as to prepare a compliant proposal.* Are the very best staff available to write the proposal documents? Are there other key competing proposal priorities that will dilute the effectiveness of the proposal operations group? Is there secure floor and wall space available in your facilities to house a proposal team? Are there sufficient computers and printers that will be able to be dedicated to the proposal publication effort?

The bid–no bid process must balance the cost of responding; the availability of human, material, and other resources; and the magnitude of the business opportunity. The availability of in-house or consultant staff, facilities, and equipment resources to provide effective proposal support cannot alone drive the decision-making process but certainly must be considered. If your company cannot commit the best resources to prepare the proposal, then you should strongly reconsider any decision to bid the procurement. For the small business, the vice president of business development must perform this downselection process, working with a multidisciplinary team. The company's owners should get involved as well.

The major objective of the bid–no bid process is to arrive at a rational, business-based consensus within your company to pursue or not pursue a given procurement opportunity. It is advisable to conduct both a preliminary (pre-RFP release) and final (post-RFP release) bid–no bid decision. This applies to small as well as large companies.

Poor bid–no bid decision making is arguably the most common cause of business development failure in the federal contracting marketplace. Most small businesses fail within their first 5 years of operation. Merely because your company has related technical expertise does not mean that you have a high probability of winning the business or that the business fits strategically with your goals and direction. The shotgun approach to business development and proposal development will be unsuccessful in the long term.

7.4 Planning and organizing

Once you receive an RFP, your acquisition team for that procurement should conduct an audit of the document, carefully mapping and accounting for all requirements, including the CDRL and DIDs. Review the staffing level requirements and position descriptions in the RFP. Formulate appropriate questions to be submitted in writing to the government for clarification. Be prudent in asking questions because your competitors will be given copies of those questions along with the government’s response.

Various automated tools are available to support the RFP analysis and proposal development processes. These software products include Proposal Master, eProposal Master, RFP Master, eRFP Master, and Presentation Builder (Sant Corporation), PME (Power NET), *RESTRIEVE* (Applied Solutions; <http://www.appliedsolutions.com>), and Proposal Strategist (Wiseware).

7.4.1 Draft executive summary

Prior to your company’s formal kickoff meeting for each procurement effort, an individual appointed by the proposal manager should prepare a one- to two-page executive summary that introduces high-level themes, demonstrates your company’s understanding of the importance of the client’s project or program, indicates that your company has the credentials and talent to do the project, provides an overview of your company’s approach, as well as its direct benefits to the client, and highlights key project staff.

Your executive summary should applaud your client and your client’s achievements. In addition, it should be structured to address in summary form the evaluation factors found in Section M of the RFP. Help your client understand exactly how your company will enhance their achievements, funding, congressional notoriety, technical excellence, and so forth.

7.4.2 Theme development

A theme is a substantiated sales message, a point of emphasis, an advantage, a unique or superior benefit, or a supported claim. Themes reappear, woven inextricably throughout the proposal volumes and serve to focus and unify the entire presentation. A good theme is direct, addresses a program issue or customer concern, and can be supported by concrete evidence. Your company's strengths and the competition's weaknesses can be the bases for themes. Themes are highly sensitive material and should always be marked as competition-sensitive materials when distributed to staff throughout your company for review and comment. It is suggested that your company purchase stamps that read Competition-Sensitive.

There are two types of themes: (1) common themes and (2) unique themes, or discriminators. Common themes, although obvious and unprofound, are still important to incorporate into your proposal. High performance, low risk, is an example of a common theme. Unique themes, or discriminators, are based upon particular advantages your company can offer and upon distinct disadvantages of your competition. Discriminators are vital, credible points that are meaningful to your client and constitute the real sales hooks. You need to do your marketing homework to identify these discriminators and then locate them at appropriate points in the proposal documents. Perhaps your company is the only known proposer that has developed personal-computer-based air-traffic-controller instructional materials for a particular office of the FAA. A discriminator that you would certainly include in your proposal is a statement that highlights this unique contractual experience. It should appear, as appropriate, in section headings, the narrative, graphics, and captions. This message can also be conveyed via photographs or your proposal volume cover design. You can even reinforce this important unique theme in your compliance matrix.

In small proposals (fewer than 50 pages), your company may wish to develop 8 to 10 major themes and 15 to 20 minor (or subsection) themes. In larger proposal efforts, there may be 25 or more major themes and several hundred minor themes.

The following are select examples of themes. The particular procurement situation dictates whether these may be common or unique, major or minor.

- Lessons learned and best practices from our phase-ins with ONR, NAVAIR, and TACOM-ARDEC will be applied to ensure a smooth transition from day one of this important contract.
- Our real-time supervision and automated performance assessment methods have proven to be responsive and timely for other USACE clients.

- Our exemplary past performance with the U.S. Navy is the credibility base for this procurement.
- Our innovative technical approach based upon SEI CMM-structured methodologies allows for cost-effective software engineering with a focus on your stakeholders.
- We offer established relationships with world-class computer science departments at universities to ensure an ongoing, accessible base of talent.
- We understand and have direct experience with Clinger-Cohen and the Department of Energy's IT capital planning requirements and financial planning.
- We will ensure continuity of operations through industry-trend-setting employee retention rates made possible by superlative, yet cost-competitive fringe benefits.
- We will use specific metrics to quantify and monitor customer perceptions of our level of technical proficiency and interpersonal skill.
- As extensions of the Air Combat Command's staff in Europe, much of our energy will be dedicated to developing and supporting solutions-based decision making consistent with the external and internal drivers that impact day-to-day operational activities.
- We will address problem resolution proactively and positively in the context of partners working toward common goals.
- We will conduct business at the operational level in strict accordance with FIP, commercial leasing, and software licensing procedures and protocols.
- The ABC team: superlative service built upon knowledge, common sense, and that intangible personal touch.
- We have a high level of competence demonstrated by NASA customer-approval ratings of 94.8% in the last review period.
- The accuracy of our cost and labor projections, as well as our accountability, are illustrated by costs being within 2% of budget each month.
- We will prove to be highly capable representatives as we honor the daily and big-picture needs of an agency whose work and mission is critical to the economic health of America within the global marketplace.
- Our management and procurement structures have been specifically designed to support accelerated schedules, immediate mobilization, and midcourse changes.

- Our cost-effective approach to environmental solutions meshes closely with the USACE's nationwide initiative to improve business practices and to produce quality results.
- Our well-established advocacy, mentoring, and practice of process control and checking also links with the Navy's emphasis on process improvements directed toward revolutionizing effectiveness, being more responsive to customer needs, and being more accountable to taxpayers.
- We transitioned the contract in Savannah River with 100% retention of qualified, incumbent personnel, while maintaining 99.89% system availability at all levels.
- Our networked environment, business culture of technical resource sharing, proactive administrative support, and ongoing project communication channels will ensure that staff and resources are on the job when and where they are needed to support the U.S. Postal Service.
- We are able to propose proven leadership that allows program continuity while preserving program institutional knowledge.
- ABC Company has crafted a very effective, successful, and proven recruitment process. We have cultivated a companywide business culture that attracts and retains highly talented professionals.
- This single-vendor management approach will eliminate program accountability complexities, reduce costs, and minimize overall management risks and personnel issues and concerns to the Department of Health and Human Services.
- We bring an established track record of competing and submitting deliverables to the Department of Transportation ahead of schedule.
- Our demonstrated record of careful cost controls will result in best-value support to NOAA throughout the life of the contract.
- In-house IR&D on interactive software is directly applicable to the technical solution for this important NASA/MSFC project, thereby saving you money.
- The total Washington, D.C.-based data management resources of our company will be available for application to specific needs of this important EPA program through our program manager.
- COTS hardware that we have proven in similar situations will minimize start-up time requirements, development costs, and reduce the phase-in period.

- Dedicated, hand-picked Software Engineer offers 18 years of documented success in developing and managing automated systems for the DoD.
- All our proposed professional staff are currently working on the existing contract and hold active secret clearances.
- We will leverage our automated trend analysis database to support risk mitigation.
- Proximity of our company's headquarters to Fort Bliss will ensure effective, real-time communications with the COTR and CO.
- We are a progressive minority-owned firm with an established \$3M line of credit to ensure financial flexibility and stability.
- Our company staffs and maintains an office within 5 miles of the IRS work site.
- Our company was the incumbent on the last modeling and simulation project, which successfully formed the basis for this one.
- Our company has served the Air Force Center for Environmental Excellence (AFCEE) successfully for the past 2 years. Our legacy of field-tested performance...
- State-of-the-art technology meets the NRC's current and projected requirements; that is, no new technology is needed.
- An excellent team of well-qualified, well-integrated subcontractors reduces program risk. We know how to work together successfully.
- Our company's organizational structure has a one-to-one correlation with the Air Force's project organization for ease of interface and communication.
- Our QA-QC program, as already implemented at McClellan AFB, will ensure rapid problem isolation and resolution.
- Our integrated product team (IPT) approach will focus upon the formulation of small, flexible teams to evaluate emerging technologies and offer informed recommendations.

Your company's Acquisition Team members should convey appropriate themes to your client during the client contact and marketing phases of the proposal life cycle. Then, when those themes reappear in the proposal, the client will tend to view them as natural outcomes of previous conversations and meetings rather than unvarnished marketeering tactics. And once again, themes should be woven into the proposal body, carefully integrated into headings, text, captions, figures and tables, and even compliance matrices (under a comments section).

7.4.3 **Bullet drafts and storyboards**

Proposals are choreographed exercises in knowledge and information management, assembly, and packaging.

Storyboards, bullet drafts, scenarios, mock-ups, and scribble sheets⁵ are proposal tools designed to break the proposal planning, control, and tracking process into bite-sized pieces. Proposal choreography provides the proposal manager with a mechanism designed to develop a coherent, consistent document from multiple authors with varying degrees of writing skill in a limited time frame. Storyboards help to ensure that all RFP requirements are addressed. They also assist in linking text with graphics and help technical authors overcome any initial writer's block. Many times these tools prove vital for coordinating subcontractor input. Choreographic techniques are most effective and appropriate for the technical volume of a proposal, but can certainly be applied to other volumes as well.

Select proposal choreographic guidelines include the following:

- Identify the scope and context of the section or subsection to be choreographed.
- Identify appropriate sections of the RFP or RFS that correspond to that particular proposal section or subsection.
- Develop an introductory sentence that sets the tone and provides the emphasis for the narrative of the section or subsection.
- Prepare major and minor theme statements for the section or subsection.
- Prepare five to eight statements that clarify and direct your writing approach for the section or subsection. These short statements are to include the major and minor points to address in the narrative. The bullet statements are to build upon and resonate with the thematic statements.
- Generate at least one graphic concept and compose a thematically meaningful caption.
- Prepare a concluding or summation sentence for the section or subsection.

5 Proposal choreography, that is, the manner by which a proposal response is planned, controlled, and tracked section-by-section, can be referred to by a variety of names: storyboards (a term borrowed from Hollywood moviemaking), bullet drafts, scenarios (the method of Hyman Silver and Associates), mock-ups (a process used by Shipley Associates), and scribble sheets (a method employed by TRW). Choreography will be used herein to refer interchangeably to storyboards, bullet drafts, scenarios, mock-ups, and scribble sheets.

The number of storyboards, bullet drafts, or scenarios to be developed for any given proposal depends upon the complexity of the RFP. Small procurement efforts, for example, might only require 10 to 15 storyboard sheets. A sample bullet draft worksheet is shown in Figure 7.6.

7.5 Kickoff meeting

The formal kickoff meeting is your proposal manager’s best opportunity to inspire and imbue his or her team with a winning attitude. The proposal manager can do this most effectively if he can demonstrate that he has planned carefully, organized a workable proposal response schedule, and made the best use of company resources. The attendance of your

Proprietary Bullet Draft Worksheet			
Proposal volume:	Subsection number:	Writer:	
Subsection author:		Page limit:	Due date:
RFP requirement:			
Discriminator:			
Themes:			
Features:		Benefits:	
Introductory sentence (verbatim):			
Major points (bullet format):			
Concluding sentence (verbatim):			
<hr style="border: 1px solid black;"/> Approved by: _____ Date: _____			

Figure 7.6
Sample bullet draft worksheet.

company's senior management during the kickoff meeting is highly desirable in order to ensure that the importance of the procurement to your firm's future is communicated in person.

7.6 Writing

The goal of each proposal author is to obtain the maximum score for each subsection. This is accomplished most effectively when writers follow the storyboards or bullet drafts carefully. Proposal writing is not recording as much as one knows about a given technical or programmatic topic. Too often, technical staff who are assigned to write proposal sections merely provide a voluminous quantity of material that does not address the specific elements contained within the RFP, nor does it mesh effectively with the narrative and graphics prepared by the other authors. Quantity alone is totally inadequate to yield a winning response. Crisp, distilled writing that follows the RFP precisely complemented by appropriate graphics and photographs is a major step in the right direction.

One goal of preproposal intelligence gathering is to have assembled a hard copy or CD-ROM technical library of documents relevant to the procurement at hand. Your proposal writers should consult this resource material in advance of the release of the RFP. In addition, the government often provides contractors with access to a technical library of project documents once the RFP is released. These resources can provide the basis for the detailed, client- and program-specific narrative that is a requirement for successful proposals. Papers and technical documents will help illuminate the types of technical issues of interest and concern to your client. You will want to demonstrate an understanding of these issues.

Writers should also keep in mind that in the case of multiyear projects, they must prepare a response that factors in evolutionary program growth and change, as well as *technology insertion*, the addition of advanced technological modules or elements into an existing infrastructure.

7.7 Major contractor review cycles

All proposals your company produces should be subject to careful internal review before delivery to your client. Senior management endorsement of and participation in the review cycles is strongly encouraged. The purpose of the color team reviews is to assess the responsiveness of the proposal to the given RFP or RFS; to ensure that your company's themes are apparent throughout the entire proposal; to identify any statements that

could be misrepresentative of your company or of the potential client; and to provide concrete suggestions for improvement in such areas as structure, strategy, technical approach, risk management, and pricing. Reviews are not exercises in fault-finding, but rather are the objective, solutions-oriented critique of vital company documents. See Figure 7.7 for a flow diagram of the internal review process.

7.7.1 **Blue or Pink Team**

The Blue or Pink Team evaluations are generally early course correction reviews. The fundamental technical architecture and programmatic direction of your company's proposal should be evaluated at this stage, deficiencies identified and articulated, and corrective actions and specific solutions offered. Avoid focusing on formatting, aesthetic, editorial, or page-count aspects of the proposal documents at this early stage.

If possible, electronic configuration control of the proposal documents should remain in the hands of the proposal technical writing team up through the response to and integration of Pink or Blue Team comments. An interactive meeting should take place between the reviewers and the proposal writing team once the review is complete in order to clearly communicate the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal effectively. The focus is on substantive corrective solutions. Such comments as "beef up this section," "weak," "needs work," or "rewrite this part" are not helpful. Comments beneficial to the proposal writers include, "Enhance Section 4.6 by discussing specific automated cost and schedule control applications, particularly as they are compatible with . . .," or "Augment your discussion of technical and contractual interfaces with the Navy by including a graphic that clearly indicates points of contact. A rough sketch of this graphic is attached." Reviewers should attempt to provide specific guidance, direction, and solutions, as well as encouragement.

7.7.2 **Red Team**

The Red Team functions as an internal SEB, critiquing the proposal for compliance with RFP instructions and evaluation criteria (as found in Sections L and M, respectively, of the RFP). The Red Team looks for consistency and continuity among sections and volumes (intervolume compatibility), inclusion of sales messages and win strategies, presence and substantiation of themes, clarity of text and artwork, and overall believability and persuasiveness. The proposal manager will determine how to respond to the Red Team comments, particularly when there is disagreement among reviewers. Figure 7.8 presents a sample proposal reviewer's comment sheet.

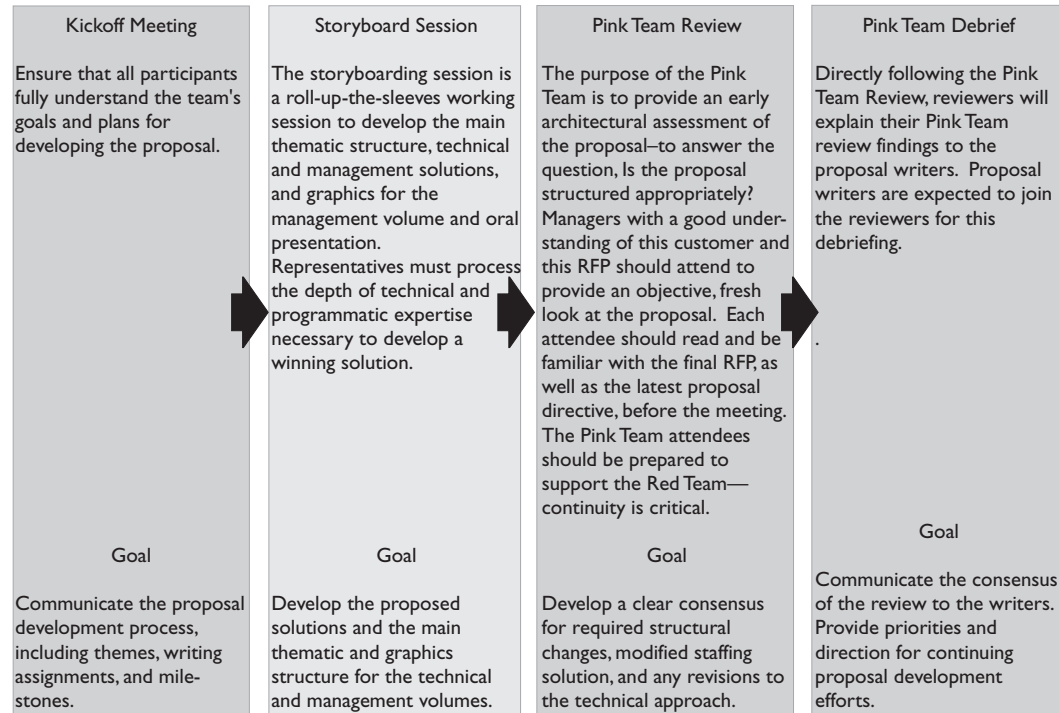


Figure 7.7 Internal review process and goals.

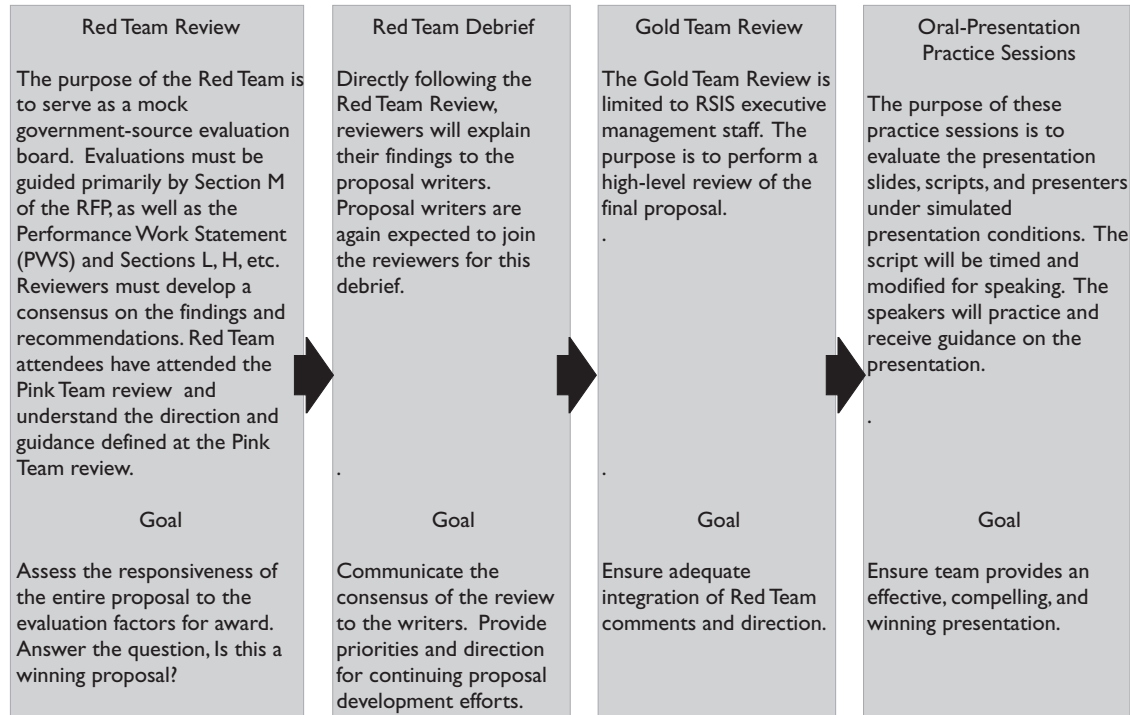


Figure 7.7 (continued)

Red Team Evaluation Report					
Proposal Title _____	Reviewer _____				
Volume No./Title _____	Date _____				
Section or Block No./Title _____					
Criteria	Evaluation				
	Good	Average	Inadequate	Not Applicable	Cannot Judge
1. Overall impact (scoring potential)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Readability and understandability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Responsiveness to RFP requirements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Responsiveness to evaluation criteria	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Theme inclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Presentation format (including graphics)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Technical content quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Believability and persuasiveness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specific suggestions for improvement:					

Figure 7.8 Sample proposal reviewer’s comment sheet.

The Red Team serves as a recommending group. Logistically, the Red Team reviewers should be fully dedicated to the effort, preferably colocated and isolated from the day-to-day demands of business during the course of their review. Red Team reviewers should include a number of people with appropriate technical competence and persons with high degrees of marketing and management competence. No reviewer should have participated in the proposal writing effort. Red Teaming is not merely an editorial exercise. Make available a copy of the full RFP to Red Team members, along with any amendments and a full kickoff meeting package (proposal directive) that includes your major and minor themes and completed storyboards or bullet drafts. The proposal manager should provide written instructions to the Red Team reviewers explaining what the expectations of the review process are and asking that comments be detailed and explicit so that the proposal team can respond effectively to those

comments. The Red Team proposal draft should include a table of contents, compliance matrix, and list of acronyms.

The Red Team review is designed to assess the following:

- Overall impact and competitiveness of proposal;
- Readability and understandability;
- Compliance with RFP or RFS requirements—both overt and hidden;
- Inclusion of major and minor themes;
- Effectiveness of the presentation, including graphics and photographs;
- Quality of technical and programmatic content;
- Believability and persuasiveness (are the specific benefits to the client very apparent?).

The recommendations and comments that emerge from the Red Team review should be presented to the proposal writing team in a briefing and weighed and integrated (as appropriate) into the proposal volumes under the direction of the proposal manager. Specific people should be assigned to completing all action items identified as essential.

Red Team reviews should be scheduled early enough in the proposal response cycle to allow sufficient time for the proposal manager and proposal writers to implement an adequate recovery. Typically, on a 30-day response cycle, this is 15 days prior to the final production and delivery of the proposal documents.

7.7.3 **Gold Team**

In some companies, the Gold Team is a final review of the proposal volumes by members of senior management. Other firms use the Gold Team as a final proofreading and quality assurance stage. Figure references, pagination, and table of contents should be verified at this point. Participants include the proposal manager and senior publications staff.

7.7.4 **Black Team**

Black teaming is a low-profile, highly confidential activity designed to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and current business activities of the competition. A document known as a competitor assessment might be generated from black teaming. Black teams generally report to a member of senior management of the prime contractor. Black teams may include an

outside legal firm or marketing intelligence consulting group who can investigate the competition without involving your company directly.

7.7.5 **Black hat review**

Black hat reviews of your proposal strategy and approach are conducted by leveraging the knowledge and experience of recent hires within your company who came from your competitors. Check your resume database for the names of these people. Then interview them regarding your competitors' (their former employers') business approaches and cultural biases. Document this information for future use. Reviewers attempt to identify gaps in your proposal approach so it can be strengthened.

7.8 **Preparing for orals and BAFO**

Proposal team activity does not stop following submittal of the volumes to the client. Once a company's proposal is determined to be within the competitive range based upon the evaluation factors, the client may elect to have the company deliver an oral presentation to the evaluation panel or to submit a BAFO, or both. The BAFO is, in effect, the opportunity to enhance your proposal. Generating an effective presentation and planning and rehearsing for orals are very important and require significant time and focus. Many times, BAFOs involve providing the client organization with a revised cost volume that reflects the lowest possible cost for which your company can successfully perform the statement of work.

Increasingly important in the federal procurement process, oral presentations provide an excellent opportunity to reaffirm your company's distinctive capabilities, innovative technical solutions and their benefits, and risk-aware program management approach. Capabilities include qualified personnel (proposed project manager and key staff), phase-in experience, cost-effectiveness of your approach, and records of outstanding contractual experience, among others. The oral presentation cannot exceed the government-assigned time limit, which can range from 15 min to several hours. Multiple rehearsals or dry runs are crucial to help your company's staff gain confidence as presenters and to acquaint them with public speaking, tight time limitations for presentation, and smooth computer and audiovisual equipment operation. Some government agencies and private-sector clients are now requiring multimedia presentations, replete with color, sound, and highly professional imagery. Clients want to meet and interact with the proposed project team face to face. They want to be comfortable with the people they will work with during the contract life cycle.

7.9 Debriefings (refer to FAR 15.1003)

Contractors that have submitted proposals to the U.S. government for a particular procurement are legally entitled to debriefings. Debriefings may take the form of a face-to-face meeting, teleconference, or letter and are generally attended by representatives of the government's contracting office, project technical staff, and financial and legal offices. Request a debriefing in writing through the client's contracts offices. Lessons and information that your company can learn from a debriefing experience include the following:

- Breakdown of your technical score by proposal section (this is provided in very general terms);
- Process by which the scores were derived by the government evaluators;
- Strongest and weakest points of your proposal;
- How best to proceed with the next proposal to the same procuring agency; What specifically is important to that agency, for example, a reluctance to accept complex teaming arrangements, close and effective control of subcontractors and consultants that may be proposed, an emphasis upon a particular project management configuration, and incumbent capture strategy;
- Advisability of making further offers to the particular client.

Do not expect to have your proposal compared with your competitors' proposals during a formal debriefing process. Competitor proposal performance and cost strategies are strictly off limits. You may, of course, request a copy of the winning proposal volumes under the FOIA. Company-sensitive trade secrets and commercial or financial information contained in the competitor's proposal will not be released indiscriminately by the government. Instead, the proposal documents will undergo review both by the competitor (preliminary) and the government to ensure that only information in accordance with the FOIA is released.

We are now ready to take a closer look at the major parts of a proposal submitted in response to a formal RFP.

ENDNOTES

1. Holtz, Herman, and Terry Schmidt, *The Winning Proposal: How to Write It*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.
2. The federal IFB, or sealed bid procedure, should result in a firm-fixed-price contract. This procedure is especially well-suited for government purchases of COTS items. Bids are opened publicly and the award is made immediately to the lowest priced, responsible, responsive bidder. No discussions are allowed, and no exceptions may be taken by the contractor.

The federal government has been moving in the direction of procuring dual-use, COTS, and NDI. An example of this procurement trajectory is in the purchase of intelligence and electronic warfare (IEW) equipment for the U.S. Army. (See "DOD's Airborne Recon Plan Pushes Sensors, Image Recognition," *Sensor Business News*, May 8, 1996.) In FY1997, DoD seeks a \$250M *Dual-Use Applications Program* (DUAP). With COTS/dual-use embedded in DoD acquisition, MIL SPECS will no longer provide giant defense firms with an artificial edge over agile new defense entrants into the marketplace. (See "DOD Acquisition Chief Pushes COTS/Dual-Use, Wants More Suppliers," *Technology Transfer Week*, April 30, 1996.)

The concept of responsiveness was developed in sealed bidding, wherein a Contracting Officer is prohibited from considering any bid that deviates from the IFB. This prohibition does not apply to negotiated procurements. (See Cibinic, John, and Ralph C. Nash, *Formation of Government Contracts*, 2nd ed., Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, pp. 523-524.)

An RFP, which results in competitive proposals for competitive acquisitions under P.L. 98-369 (Competition in Contracting Act of 1984) is a more flexible approach used in sole source or competitive situations. Any contract type from fixed-price to cost-reimbursement can be used. The government opens and reviews proposals privately. The number and identity of offerors are not revealed (immediately), and award may be based upon considerations other than price. Considerable discussion between the government and the offeror may or may not take place. The offeror may take exception to the solicitation terms or may submit alternate proposals. And modifications to proposals by the offerors are permitted. Upon acceptance, the proposal or offer becomes a contract in some government procurements wherein the technical and contractual requirements are tightly specified.