

**D**iscriminators are features of your offer or solution that (1) differ from a competitor’s offer and (2) are acknowledged by the prospect as important. Both conditions must be met.

*If you are not certain if your features are discriminators, see Features, Advantages, and Benefits.*

Differentiators meet only the first condition. They are the features of your offer that differ from the features of a competitor’s offer. Differentiators are often called unique selling points (USPs).

However, if the difference does not matter to the prospect, it is not important. Hence, discriminators are differentiators that are acknowledged by the prospect, as important.

The strongest discriminators are true for you and not true for any of your competitors. The weakest discriminators are true for you and not true for at least one of your competitors.

The strength of a discriminator also depends on its importance to the prospect. The CEO of a large defense contractor once said, “We must identify at least one truly unique discriminator to justify bidding.”

If the buying organization can discern no discriminators among the various offers, then low price becomes the remaining discriminator. However, most buyers say that relatively small differences between offers become the discriminators among the winner and the losers.

**Discriminators**

1. **Identify discriminators by understanding your prospect, your competitors, and yourself.**
2. **Identify both positive and negative discriminators and position them as positively as possible.**
3. **Continuously reexamine whether a discriminator still discriminates.**
4. **Develop discriminators by continuing to define them more specifically.**
5. **Emphasize discriminators that focus on people, experience, performance, and understanding of the prospect’s business. They are usually the most powerful discriminators.**

**1**

**Identify discriminators by understanding your prospect, your competitors, and yourself.**

When you rent a car, do you ask about the color of the car? No?

When you purchase a car, do you ask about the color of the car? Yes?

If so, paint color is a discriminator when you buy but not when you rent.

Many sellers have either not seen what their competitors offer or rely on obsolete data about their competitors. When you claim to have a unique approach but do not, then you lose credibility with your prospect.

Even worse, many writers know so little about what they offer that they describe it generically:

We offer an experienced network technician.

This claim doesn’t explain the experience of the technician or how the prospect will benefit.

Prospects, often not experts in what they are buying, need help to determine the importance of your discriminators. When you do not know specifically what your competitor

offers, discriminate your features against other criteria, like national averages, independent study results, or to other approaches that you considered but rejected as inferior.

Consider these good examples:

Our job site safety record shows that we experience 50 percent fewer lost-time accidents than the national average for comparable construction activity.

While not all outsourced employees will choose to transition to a new support vendor, independent studies by the Acme Group show that our job offer acceptance rate is 14 percent above the industry average, and that our retention rate long-term is equal to the retention rate of new employees.

We considered using a fast-track construction approach, which initially appeared to cut four weeks from the construction schedule. However, after studying the local permitting review and approval process, we decided it might offend state regulatory officials and actually increase the risk of expensive schedule delays.

## 2

### Identify both positive and negative discriminators and position them as positively as possible.

Many proposal writers focus exclusively on their positive discriminators. Also identify and deal with your negative ones:

**Negative discriminator**

Our company manufactures the only seals ever used on submarines that operate below 2000 meters. Recently a seal failed, endangering the crew. Our client then spent \$250 million to determine the cause, with our assistance.

Clearly, the seal failure is a major negative discriminator. A possible reply:

As the only designer and manufacturer of seals for submarines operating below 2000 meters, and after spending \$250 million learning how to improve seal design, can you afford to teach another supplier how to make them?

While possibly too direct for some in a written proposal, the example illustrates how you can emphasize the positive side of your negative discriminators.

## 3

### Continuously reexamine whether a discriminator still discriminates.

The power of the discriminator to an individual may vary over time.

Many procurements have been lost because the seller assumed the reason they won the last contract still applied.

Consider these examples:

Decaffeinated coffee is far more popular in the evening than in the morning. The power of the discriminator to an individual may be cyclical each day.

A major engine manufacturer won a large order by selling a replacement engine that offered greater thrust. In the next competition they followed the same strategy, offering increased thrust as their key discriminator. They lost when the prospect calculated the life-cycle cost of the additional fuel and judged it more important than increased thrust.

Here the prospect's perceived needs changed. Also, the factions with power may have changed from users to the economic buyer.

## 4

### Develop discriminators by continuing to define them more specifically.

Note the progression from generic to specific:

Experienced manager.

Experienced project manager.

All project managers have a minimum of 10 years of experience.

Fred Jones, our proposed manager, has 10 years of project management experience.

Fred Jones, our proposed project manager, also managed the similar North Cove project to an on-time delivery and within budget.

A writer in a national proposal publication coined the phrase "generic specific," words that sound specific but are really generic. Discriminate by being specific and offering proof.

**Generic Specific Language**

The program manager will regularly review the risk log with the program team and pursue mitigation actions as needed.

**Specific Language Revision**

Dave Lee, Program Manager, will review the risk log every Friday and publish corrections on the program website by close of business on the following Monday.

What is the real meaning of a discriminator like the following:

200 years of experience on our team

Does the team include 20 people with 10 years of experience each or 200 people with 1 year of experience each? Be specific by quantifying, if possible.

Consider another example:

Improved fuel economy

We may fail to quantify because we do not know how much fuel economy will improve, we are too lazy to find out, or we do not want to be held accountable.

Be as specific as possible. Oddly enough, the claim of a 14.5 percent improvement is more credible than a 15 percent claim, appearing to be more precise.

## 5

**Emphasize discriminators that focus on people, experience, performance, and understanding of the prospect's business. They are usually the most powerful discriminators.**

See *Relevant Experience/Past Performance*.

See *Executive Summary, and Features, Advantages, and Benefits*.

Each person is unique; even identical twins are not truly identical. If the prospect values the differences in the abilities of the individuals you propose, use these differences as discriminators.

Frequently, sellers throw away the opportunity to use individuals as their discriminators by stating:

All our people are good; it does not matter who you get.

By the time the contract is awarded, we do not know who will actually be available.

We do not have a Big Name like our competitors, so we will not name anyone. We do not play bait-and-switch.

Maximize the prospect's interest in the individuals you propose by building a rapport between the prospect and these key individuals before the bid request is issued.

Consider your own purchase of skilled services, such as selecting the person or company to remodel your home. Nearly everyone in this situation wants to know, "Who will actually be in my home doing the work while I am away?"

No two companies have been awarded the same jobs, so your specific experience is different. If you can persuade the prospect to care about the difference, you have a discriminator.

Extend your discussions of experience and performance beyond the appendix or a separate experience or a performance section of the proposal. Cite experience and performance throughout your proposal to substantiate all claims. Use a Success Story Template such as the one found in guideline 4 of *RELEVANT EXPERIENCE/PAST PERFORMANCE*, to present your experience and performance in a customer-focused manner.

Most prospects for complex systems and services can readily identify several organizations with sufficient talent, expertise, and resources.

The critical discriminator is often an understanding of the prospects' business, vision, and immediate needs. The winner is often the selling organization that best shows how it can help the prospect achieve its strategic vision.

Discriminate yourself by demonstrating your understanding of the prospect's business throughout your entire proposal. Do not limit integrating discriminators to the executive summary and finals briefing.