

Seven Characteristics of an Effective Proposal

A proposal is first and foremost a sales document containing technical and pricing information.

Developing a high quality proposal requires a well-executed capture effort and a capture plan that is effectively incorporated into the entire proposal development effort.

The quality and competitiveness of a proposal depend on a number of criteria that measure how well you comply with the customer’s bid instructions, respond to the requirements and issues that drove the procurement, articulate an effective and competitive strategy, understand the competitive environment, and then craft a persuasive proposal that is well written, easy to evaluate and appealing to read. Shipleys Associates has categorized the seven characteristics as shown in Figure 1.

Characteristics	Definitions
Compliance	Have all bid request requirements been addressed and all instructions followed?
Responsiveness	Does the proposal clearly and directly address the customer’s needs?
Strategy	Is it obvious why this offer should be selected?
Competitive Focus	Is it obvious why this offer is better than competitive offers?
Quality of Writing	Is the writing customer focused, well organized, clear, and correct?
Visualization	Do visuals clearly communicate major selling points?
Page and Document Design	Is the proposal professional in appearance and easy to evaluate?

Figure 1. Shipleys Associates Effective Proposal Characteristics. *High quality, effective proposals include these key attributes, regardless of industry or type of business or organization.*

The radar diagram in Figure 2 provides a graphical rating of the characteristics by industry benchmark, signifying the relative importance of the characteristics to effective proposals.

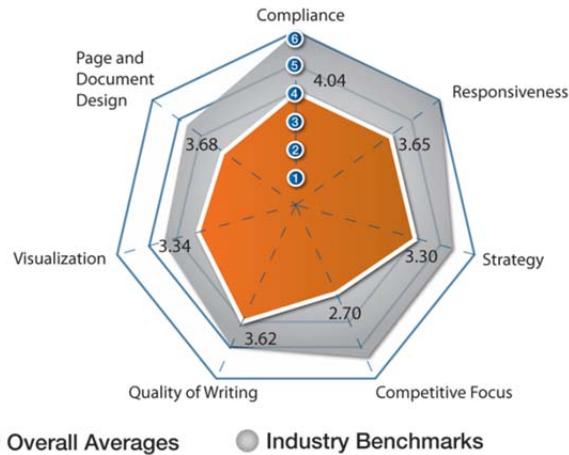


Figure 2. Composite Proposal Assessment Rating by Criterion. *After assessing over 340 large and small proposals originating in 6 countries, Shipleys plotted the average composite scores (orange) versus industry benchmarks (gray) for high-quality, competitive proposals. Ratings are 1 = Not Found, 2 = Major Improvement Needed, 3 = Marginal, 4 = Average, 5 = Above Average, and 6 = Superior.*

Cross references to topics and guidelines are based on the 4th Edition of the Shipleys Proposal Guide.

These commonly recognized characteristics were established by the Association of Proposal Management Professionals (APMP) and the Business Development Institute-International (BDI-I). These standards are further supplemented by proposal development standards established in the *Shipleys Proposal Guide*. The overall score for a proposal is weighted based on the relative importance of the characteristic; for example, since compliance and responsiveness are most important, they have a higher impact on the overall score than other less important criteria.

Characteristic Definitions	Proposal Guide Sections
<p>Compliance means strict adherence to the customer’s bid request, both the submittal instructions and the requirements. Compliance with instructions means that you have followed the requested format, answered all questions, completed all forms, and submitted your response to the right person and place on time. Compliance with requirements means that you have agreed to meet all requirements as asked in the bid request. Being fully compliant will not ensure a win, but failure to be compliant can easily result in a loss.</p>	<p>Compliance and Responsiveness Outlining Headings</p>
<p>Responsiveness means addressing the customer’s underlying needs. Proposals can be responsive but not compliant, or compliant but nonresponsive. The proposal cannot simply agree to meet the requirements in the solicitation. The bid must be specific in describing “how” the requirement will be met. It must also address the needs of the customer and provide specific benefits that are associated with the features of the proposed solution. These features are most powerfully presented as discriminators, features of your offer that provide valued benefits to the customer and are only available from you.</p>	<p>Compliance and Responsiveness Executive Summary Theme Statements Organization Choosing Correct Words</p>
<p>Strategy and Persuasion: Strategy is best developed during the pre-solicitation phase. Strategies that move the bidder to a favored position can be categorized as actions taken to leverage strengths, mitigate weaknesses, highlight competitor weaknesses, and neutralize competitor strengths. Execution of strategies produces features with associated benefits and potential discriminators. During the proposal development phase, these strategies become the central messages of the proposal. Persuasion is using these central messages in the proposal in a variety of ways including theme statements, action captions, informative headings, value propositions, risk mitigation approaches, and substantiated descriptions of benefits and discriminators.</p>	<p>Proposal Strategy Theme Statements Action Captions Headings Features, Advantages and Benefits Risk Management</p>
<p>Competitive Focus: A winning proposal must not only respond to the customer’s issues and requirements, it must also reflect your knowledge of the competition and their strengths, weaknesses, solutions, and pricing. Only by performing effective competitive assessments will you be able to correctly articulate your own discriminators relative to the competition. A well-executed competitive assessment will contribute valuable input to your strategy, win themes, discriminators, ghosting of competitors, solution, pricing and teaming considerations.</p>	<p>Discriminators Proposal Strategy</p>
<p>Quality of Writing: A common mistake many companies make is they view a proposal as a “technical proposal” rather than a sales document. Effective proposal writing requires a style of writing that is often foreign to many academics, engineers and other technically-oriented professionals. The analytical (or inductive) style must be abandoned in favor of a style that is best exemplified by newspaper articles and sales brochures. This style of top-down (or deductive) writing provides the main points at the beginning and then develops the details and substantiation, followed by a summary. This approach ensures that your key sales messages are read by the evaluation team.</p>	<p>Organization Choosing Correct Words Customer Focus Letter Proposals Headings</p>
<p>Visualization: High-level readers of proposals, those either making or influencing the selection decision, often only skim proposals, looking at the graphics that stand out, then reading the captions, headings, highlight statements, and the executive summary. These readers must be able to see why you should be selected without reading body text. Effective graphics leave overall positive impressions and can make it easy for evaluators to find detailed answers to questions. Studies of retention show that after a single reading, evaluators will remember more of what they see in a graphic than what they read in text. In addition, when evaluators both see and read the same point, they retain information longer. The key elements in retention are repetition and dual modes of acquisition.</p>	<p>Action Captions Graphics</p>
<p>Page and Document Design: The reading process is identical for technical documentation or a proposal. However, the motivation of the reader differs. The more interesting the subject to the reader, the more the reader wants the information, the less you have to entice the reader to read your document. People are lookers first, then readers. A good page and document design entices readers, then facilitates understanding, even though evaluators may not be conscious of the design techniques used. A well-organized, visually appealing design helps evaluators find what they need to know rapidly and easily while reflecting your organization’s professionalism. Never underestimate the importance of the proposal’s appearance. When competitors’ offers differ minimally, the appearance and organization of the proposal can make the difference. And lastly, the evaluation team views your proposal as the first deliverable of the new contract; make it a high quality product that reflects your attention to detail and quality standards.</p>	<p>Page and Document Design Graphics</p>

The following two pages include a proposal assessment checklist for use in evaluating and rating how your own proposals meet the characteristics.

Proposal Assessment Checklist

Proposal Name: _____

Reviewer: _____

Criteria/Checklist Items	Not Found			Superior			<i>Proposal Guide</i> Topic & Guideline(s)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Compliance Overall Rating							
Have all bid request requirements been addressed and all instructions followed?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Compliance and Responsiveness (C&R); Outlining (O)
Is compliance with organization and format instructions obvious and deliberate?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C&R 1, 5, 6; O 1, 2, 9
Are major section titles and subheadings consistent with the names and numbering in the bid request?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	O 2, 3; Headings 1
Does the proposal have a compliance matrix that is easy to find and mapped to bid request?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	C&R 6
Comments:							
Responsiveness Overall Rating							
Does the proposal clearly and directly address the prospects needs?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Compliance and Responsiveness (C&R);
Do the executive summary and section summaries link the prospects needs to the proposal solution?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Executive Summary 4; Theme Statement 6
Do major sections open with clear statements that the offering satisfies the prospects needs and requirements?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Organization 5
Do all major sections tie features and benefits to prospect requirements and needs?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Model Document 13
Does the language in each section reflect the prospects language and tone?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Choosing Correct Words 1-7
Comments:							
Strategy Overall Rating							
Is it obvious why this offer should be selected?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strategy
Does the proposal emphasize strengths and mitigate weaknesses of the proposed offering?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strategy 5, 6, 8
Are theme statements specific, factual, believable, and quantified when possible?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Theme Statements 2-9
Are theme statements, action captions, and informative headings consistent in content, language, structure, and placement?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Theme Statements, Action Captions, Heading
Is added value emphasized, quantified, and substantiated?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Value Propositions 1, 3, 4, 6
Does the proposal build on clear, coherent benefits that address both quantitative requirements and qualitative needs?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Features, Advantages, and Benefits 5
Are risk assessments and corresponding risk management approaches discussed throughout the proposal?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Risk Management 1-4
Comments:							
Competitive Focus Overall Rating							
Is it obvious why this offer is better than competitive offers?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strategy
Are discriminators prominent in themes, captions, headings, callouts, lists, and summaries?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Discriminators
Are competitors ghosted in trade studies or other discussions that substantiate the proposed offering?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strategy 9
Are competitors approaches discussed but not named?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strategy 9
Comments:							

Scale: 1. Not Found, 2. Major Improvement Needed, 3. Marginal, 4. Average, 5. Above Average, 6. Superior

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Criteria/Checklist Items	Not Found				Superior		<i>Proposal Guide</i> Topic & Guideline(s)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Quality of Writing Overall Rating							
Is the writing customer focused, well organized, clear, and correct?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Organization; Choosing Correct Words
Do sections use the top-down, four-box writing approach?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Organization; Letter Proposals 2-7
Are summaries and introductions used at all levels?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Organization 5
Do section subheadings and content reflect section introductions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Headings 6
Are paragraphs, sentences, and words kept short, when possible?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Organization 6
Are jargon and acronyms appropriate and not overused?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Choosing Correct Words 1-7
Are word use, grammar, and mechanics accurate and correct?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Choosing Correct Words 1-7
Comments:							
Visualization Overall Rating							
Do visuals clearly communicate major selling points?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Action Captions; Graphics
Are visuals professional and consistently formatted?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Graphics 3-5, 9, 10
Are all visuals appropriate, contributing significant content?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Graphics 3-5
Do all visuals have action captions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Action Captions 1-8
Do all captions have informative headings and captions linking benefits to the features shown?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Action Captions 2-5
Are all graphics referenced in prior text?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Action Captions 7
Comments:							
Page and Documents Design Overall Rating							
Is the proposal professional and easy to evaluate?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Page and Document Design (P&DD)
Does key information stand out?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P&DD 4-11
Are pages easy to read and comprehend?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P&DD 3-11
Are text and graphics balanced and appropriate for the evaluators?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P&DD 6
Are document, pagination, and graphic standards applied consistently?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P&DD 2
Is the package appealing? Would an evaluator want to look at it?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	P&DD 3
Comments:							
OVERALL PROPOSAL RATING	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Overall Proposal Comments:							