

Getting the best results from your bid team



By Emma Jaques
Onto the Page

Writing a winning bid is partly a science. But it's coaxing the bid team through the process that also makes it an art.

Every seasoned bid manager knows the truth about their profession: you never really finish a bid, you simply run out of time. Deadlines seem to be getting shorter, specifications more detailed, questions more probing. And on top of that, getting the time and attention of bid contributors is tough. It's rare for subject matter experts (let's call them SMEs for ease) to have spare time to work on a bid. So, how do you get to deadline day with the winning bid safely written – and your bid team still talking to you?

Here's what I've learnt along the way:

1 Kick things off positively

If they've not been involved in the decision to bid, it's a really good idea to start the whole process off with a kick-off session that tells the team exactly why this opportunity is worth pursuing. Ideally in a face-to-face format, this is a chance to pitch the win theme to everyone, and to get them really motivated to muck in. You're looking to give them the big picture initially: the client's vision and needs, your ability to meet and exceed these, and the reasons why you think you'll beat the competition to the prize. There's a real danger in not doing this. If your SMEs are merely asked to answer questions on their own specialism, without any background information, they're

much less likely to make a contribution that's aligned to the win theme. Or worse, they just won't appreciate the importance of their contribution and only give it a fraction of their attention.

2 Ask them to engage

As a bid manager, you need your SMEs to be with you on the journey to the finish line. At the kick-off meeting, don't be afraid to ask people to commit to the process – in return telling them what you're going to do for them. For complex bids with big teams, I've even drawn up a bid charter – a light-hearted list of the commitments expected by all parties, signed by all and stuck to the wall of the 'war room'.

Start by asking that they read the information available, telling you early on if they've spotted important information missing from the specification. This will allow you to ask for clarifications, and build the team's understanding of the requirement.

3 Keep everyone informed, but protect the team's time

Once the process is live, and the clock ticking, you need to find the right balance between keeping the team engaged and not overloading them with unnecessary noise. This is one of the principal duties on 'your side' of the charter. Give SMEs clear instructions about the packages of work they own, the internal deadlines for each package, word count, format, key themes, structure of response, and the like. Brief people individually if necessary – you'll be glad you made this investment in your own time when well-constructed responses start arriving in your inbox.

Schedule quick but regular update meetings, either face-to-face or virtually. Make

'attendance' compulsory but then be sure that these sessions are always valuable to all. Use them to provide updates on clarifications, to remind them of win themes, to gather progress reports versus deadlines.

When drawing up internal deadlines, give people as much thinking time as you can (but still leave yourself the time you need), and be prepared to negotiate with individuals as they juggle their workload. If people can see that you're helping them, they're much more likely to return the favour.

4 Be the coach

Facing a blank page can be quite daunting, even for a seasoned SME – they might well need some guidance and advice on how best to create the best response. As a bid manager, you can help by talking them through the elements that support a winning response: structure, tone of voice, how their part of the solution contributes to the win theme, must-include and must-avoid factors. Suggest they write a rough draft and then give them side-by-side feedback on how it can be improved. Done in the right way, this is an extremely powerful

tool, and will deliver benefits not only for the current bid but also for all future projects.

5 Give back past knowledge

One of the most powerful weapons in the bid manager's armoury is your knowledge base. Come what may, you'll need to keep this up to date, providing ready and easy access to past content for your SMEs. Everyone will thank you for the head start, I promise.

6 Ask for feedback

At the end of a process, talk to your team about how it was for them. If you're going to keep them on-side for future bids, you'll need to appreciate things from their perspective. From what they tell you, there'll undoubtedly be lessons to learn and improvements to be made, on both sides.

There's no easy way to write a winning bid – it takes the whole team to pull together in the right direction in order to reach the goal. But make no mistake, behind every successful bid team is the bid manager: part scientist, part artist. It's a kind of alchemy, for sure – but getting it right delivers rich rewards.

Emma Jaques is the author of The Winning Bid, published by Kogan Page, and MD at Onto the Page, Leeds-based bid consultancy, offering opportunity search services, bid support, knowledge management solutions and bid skills training.

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