

ORAL PRESENTATIONS: KEY TO WINNING GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

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INTRODUCTION

The thrust of this article, as the title suggests, is winning government contracts through effective oral presentations. I believe even those who do not “sell” to the government can gain by the advice in this article. To paraphrase the late Frank Sinatra, “If you can sell to the government, you can sell to anyone.”

The Federal Government, in recent years, has placed increased emphasis on the "oral presentation" in awarding contracts. Additionally, many Government agencies, in their Request for Proposal (RFP), stipulate that only those who will be working on the contract are to be involved with the oral presentation. This is obviously intended to permit Government agency evaluators to have an "eye-to-eye" meeting with those with whom they will be working, thereby resolving issues and questions before the contract is awarded.

There has also been a significant change with regard to visuals. Many RFPs stipulate black and white overhead transparencies instead of PowerPoint, and require them to be submitted in advance to give evaluators a “heads-up.” Because no changes are permitted in the interim, presenters must be quite careful in developing these slides so as not to “freeze” their ideas.

Most companies have developed a skilled cadre of proposal writers, and probably feel a bit uneasy about having their economic future riding not on the demonstrated ability of these writers but instead on the verbal skills of engineers and technicians who have not been called on in the past to make marketing presentations. Now, however, the "doers" must become "sellers."

THE THREE P’S TO SUCCESSFUL ORALS

The heart of my training/coaching for companies preparing to make an oral presentation for a government (or private sector) contract is what I call the Three P’s--Planning, Practicing, and Presenting. Let’s take a very brief look at how this three-step approach can lead to a successful, contract-winning oral presentation.

PLANNING

READ THE RFP FROM THE GOVERNMENT’S PERSPECTIVE. The Government has written the RFP to solicit a solution to a problem, and is looking to the private sector for that solution. Admittedly, some RFPs are so opaque they seem to have been written by the Oracle of Delphi. But the responsibility to discern what the government wants lies with the bidding companies.

INVOLVE SENIOR MANAGEMENT TO ENSURE AVAILABILITY OF KEY PERSONNEL. Both the prime contractor and the sub-contractors must be willing to expend resources necessary to win the contract. This commitment must be made by

senior management of all involved companies, and include making key experts available when required for brain storming and practice sessions, even during the June-August vacation time frame.

DEVELOP A SINGLE THEME. Think of this theme as the lead paragraph in an article in The Washington Post describing the program to be undertaken. When this theme is developed, all presenters must coordinate their presentations with this theme to produce clarity, cohesiveness and consistency.

PRACTICING

GET PROFESSIONAL HELP. The purpose of the Government's new emphasis on oral presentations is, of course, to have the people with in-depth knowledge make the presentation, not polished speakers who possess less-detailed knowledge of the RFP requirements. Still, the team of experts making the clearest and most professional presentation certainly increases its prospects of winning the contract. An outside speaking coach should be brought in to show the technical experts how to make a clear and effective presentation. (Modesty precludes me from making a specific recommendation as to who this coach should be!)

SOLVE THE EARLY VISUAL PROBLEM. If the RFP stipulates that visuals must be delivered early, the potential problem of having the thinking and recommendations/solutions "frozen" to the overheads already sent to the Government agency must be taken into account at the outset. When the visuals are being "built," they must (1) have the specificity to permit the evaluators to follow the presentation's general theme, main points, and recommendations, but (2) are sufficiently broad in scope to permit "fitting" in new ideas generated after the overheads have been submitted. One person should be the coordinator of the visuals to assure consistency.

CONDUCT "MURDER BOARDS." These realistic practice sessions with colleagues role-playing the Government agency evaluators, are the key to winning competitive presentations. Such intense practice sessions permit presenters to improve their delivery skills and anticipate questions and objections of the actual evaluators. The various "Murder Boards" should be videotaped, and the videotapes critiqued with little mercy. The following four areas, concentrated on in the "Murder Boards," will pay off in the presentation:

HONING DELIVERY SKILLS. The purpose of the oral presentation is to transmit, clearly and persuasively, the vision of the bidding company as to how it intends to accomplish the RFP-expressed requirements. The technical experts making the presentation will concentrate on the WHAT of the presentation, while the outside coach provides valuable insight into HOW the speakers communicate their ideas to the evaluators. Poor eye contact and body language, as well as poor vocal inflection, especially monotone delivery and "uh's" and "Y'knows," can negatively impact on the way a message is received. We like to think the lucidity of our presentation is more important than how we look and sound. Research has shown, however, the overriding importance of non-verbal communication on audience perception of messenger and message. The outside coach earns his or her keep in showing how to blend substance with style.

DON'T READ FROM A SCRIPT. One of the greatest speaking errors of people not accustomed to presenting is to read from a script. Little eye contact is made with the audience, and the thought may occur to the evaluators that this person is reading words written by someone else. Note cards--3x5 cards are best because their size precludes writing too much--with memory joggers can certainly be used, but speakers should show they "own" the material.

DON'T READ THE VISUALS. Few things alienate people more in any audience than to have the speaker read verbatim the words on the visuals. Speakers should reduce to a minimum the text on the visuals during the various "Murder Boards." To avoid falling into the "reading from the screen" trap, try this drill: Position yourself with your feet pointing at the audience, and at such an angle from the screen that turning to read will cause you discomfort. Don't make the pivot; keep those feet pointing toward the audience.

PRESENTING

"CASE THE JOINT." If possible, the entire presenting team should visit the room where the presentation will be made before the big day. Observe where the evaluators will sit, where the electrical outlets are located, if there are easels for flip charts (if permitted by the RFP.). If the room lacks curtains or blinds, will sunlight at the time you are scheduled to present wash out the visuals? Can lights immediately in front of a built-in screen be turned off separately? If driving, determine the traffic and parking availability at the time you will be arriving for the presentation.

USE 3X5 CARDS. One of the reasons that speaking in front of a group is the number one fear in America is the certainty many people have that their mind will go blank at a critical time. That is why so many make the mistake of reading their presentations. You can control this fear with just two 3x5 cards. On one card place an anecdote, quotation or statistic relative to the problem posed in the RFP. On the second card, place an outline of your presentation. If your mind goes blank, merely reach for the two cards together, and relate the information on the first card. You will probably recover from your temporary amnesia. If not, slide the second card to the front, and use it to see where you should pick up. The cards are "life preservers" when you are drowning in panic.

STAND WHILE PRESENTING. Inexperienced presenters will prefer sitting while making the presentation. It may be more comfortable, but the presenter who stands has better presence, better voice control, better eye contact. All "Murder Board" presentations should be made standing to help presenters get used to "being on stage."

THE QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION. The RFP generally calls for a Q&A session for clarification purposes after the formal presentation. Unless the evaluators say they wish to direct their questions to specific team members, the team leader from the prime contractor should quarterback this session, directing questions to team members according to their respective expertise. The stress level on presenters will probably be less during the Q & A session because it will take place within the more familiar conversational context. But don't be lulled into a false sense of comfort. Practice Q & A sessions should be an integral part of the "Murder Boards" so as to anticipate the type of

question likely to be asked. The Q&A session is where the evaluators' doubts and questions can be resolved, key points driven home by the presenters in their answers, and the confidence level of the evaluators with the ability of the team to "do the job" increased.

SOME FINAL ADVICE

Two statements, written many centuries apart, underline the eternal importance of speaking skills, especially when vying for contracts:

In his 1984 autobiography, Lee Iacocca wrote:

"I've known a lot of engineers with terrific ideas who had trouble explaining them to others. It's always a shame when a guy with great talent can't tell a board or committee what's in his head."

About 2500 years before Iacocca's observation, the great Greek statesman Pericles wrote:

"Those who can think, but cannot express what they think, place themselves at the level of those who cannot think."

Iacocca and Pericles have a warning for companies competing for contracts: "Terrific ideas" can easily be trumped by those who can "express what they think." If your competitors are improving the presentation skills of their technical experts because of the importance they attach to oral presentations, while you rely on your "superior" ideas, programs, and experience, you may find your firm losing millions of dollars.

A small investment in presentations training can, therefore, pay large dividends when lucrative contracts are awarded.