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Proper Preparation Produces Pitch-Perfect Award Submittals

Business Development Best Practices Series

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Prior to joining the A/E/C industries, I was a sports reporter for a local newspaper where I covered field hockey, wrestling, and soccer. Following each game (and on a tight deadline!), I interviewed coaches and players to capture one team's victory, and, subsequently, another team's loss. Fast-forward to today—I'm a marketer in the A/E/C industries, and I still get to interview people daily to discover how they take a project to the next level.

Often, without even realizing, technical staff will get too technical, and describe a project in terms that only other technical staff can understand. Yes, no one knows a project better than the technical staff who worked on it—but how can we, as marketers, convey understandable and compelling information about a project to produce a winning award submittal?

Do Your Homework

Before you meet with the project manager to interview him or her, find out everything you can about the project. I start by reading the project writeup (if there is one) and the project scope to get a better understanding of the firm's role. If it's a high-profile project, or one that has received media attention, I'll browse the web to get both a different perspective and information outside of the firm's scope.

Combined with my preliminary research, I'll draft questions based on the five Ws (who, what, when, where, why) and the one H (how). Instead of frantically taking notes during the interview, I recommend using your smartphone or a digital audio recorder. This will allow you to focus on the project, and you can listen to the interview again as many times as you'd like.

Set Deadlines

As we all know, project managers can get extremely busy—proposals or award submittals, although important, are often the last thing on their list. At your first meeting with the project manager, establish

a schedule. Determine who will draft what and set up weekly calls or meetings to discuss each draft's status.

If the project manager is too busy or avoiding your meeting, find out which other technical staff can give you the information you need. These calls or meetings may seem redundant, but they are crucial to making sure you meet the external deadline with time to spare.

Always Ask Questions

You've probably heard it before, but I'll say it again, "There is no such thing as a stupid question." This is especially true for marketers in the A/E/C industries. We are not in the field every day (or at all) so the jargon technical staff use rarely resonates with us. It's okay to ask them to clarify or fully explain something.

As you interview the project manager from your list of questions, you'll likely have follow-up questions, or new questions will come to mind. The project manager might give you a response that is more general, such as, "We used drones to develop 3-D models." That sounds totally newsworthy, right? But it does not fully explain the service. A follow-up question might be, "What type of 3-D models did you develop, and why was that needed for this project?" After the initial interview, I always mention to the project manager that I will reach out to them with additional questions or clarifications. I find myself doing that most every time, and it truly helps with the process.

Think of Each Project as a Story

I hope you like hamburgers! Here's why. After you interview the project manager and

type up the notes, it's time to make the text more engaging. You also want to make sure you are not missing any information. Think of each project as a story using the paragraph hamburger.

The top bun is the beginning—how did the firm get involved with this client and project? The burger, lettuce, and tomato are the middle—what did the firm provide? This is where you will want to include all the supporting details. The bottom bun is the end—what was the outcome? What did the firm achieve? If you follow the paragraph hamburger (mmm, delicious!), it will provide you with a more organized and descriptive story that will grab your audience's attention.

Go on a Site Visit

I don't know about you, but I am a visual learner. When I listen to a project manager describe a project, I try to envision what that project looks like. But words don't always do it justice. After the interview, ask the project manager if he or she can bring you on a site visit. You have the preliminary information from your research and interview, but the site visit can help bring your story to life.

Let the project manager give you a tour as you walk around the site. You will not only get a better understanding of the project, but also of the answers to the questions you asked during the interview. Don't be afraid to ask additional questions. Bring your smartphone or camera to take pictures. This will certainly add the finishing touch to the submittal!

With these tried-and-true reporting tactics, you'll be prepared to create a great award submittal, every time.

About the Author: Katrina Spinner-Wilson is a marketing specialist for VHB in Richmond, VA. She serves as Education Co-Chair for the Richmond Area for SMPS Virginia. Prior to joining VHB, Katrina was a sports producer for the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

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