

Presell: Your Best Strategy

What you do before the RFP will affect the competition's outcome



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It happens to all of us: an RFP comes across our desk and someone says “Go!” You contact the owner and the design team to gain an understanding, then submit a proposal. Then you wait.... and wait... until that “thanks but no thanks” letter arrives. The owner provides a debrief, but the unspoken truth is that you don’t know enough about that client, let alone the project.

Winning takes more than visiting a project site after an RFP hits the streets and submitting a sound proposal. The Harvard Business Review reported that companies with a strong preselling strategy consistently achieve win rates of 40–50% in new business and 80–90% in renewal business⁽¹⁾. Sometimes it takes years to build a rapport with a client before you earn that strategic win. In today’s competitive market, lowest cost is often the deciding factor when two proposals are equal. It’s critical to build close relationships with owners to gain knowledge that will help your proposal stand out from the rest.

If the first you are learning about a project is with the RFP, reconsider the pursuit. The best submittals come from years of relationship building and information gathering.

Whoever Stays the Closest, Wins

Whoever stays the closest to the owner has a leg up on the competition. Some subscribe to a “Ten Touch” theory that prescribes that you must touch a client at least 10 times before an RFP is released. Touches come in many forms: phone calls, emails, entertainment, meetings, to name a few. This is helpful to those individuals who need processes to follow; however, the most effective business development professionals will tell you that there’s no counting of touches, and no particular process to preselling a project. Preselling equates to taking the time to build lifetime relationships. You can do this through the channels noted above, but don’t get hung up on counting or you will become robotic vs. authentic.

Listen: It's Not About You

Getting to know an owner is similar to going to a dinner party. If you talk about yourself the entire time, you won’t be asked back. Spend more time listening than talking.

Become their confidant. Ask open ended questions that help spark thought. Eventually they will ask you to be part of the solution to the challenges they are facing.

Avoid Gossip

It’s best to steer clear of discussing your competitors when preselling. Some firms will actively sour clients on another company’s reputation in their quest to win. Avoid being one of them: take the high road and only offer thoughts on industry peers if asked. There’s no need to participate in marketplace gossip; if the owner hears you badmouthing someone, they will wonder if you will do the same to them.

Relationships Extend Beyond the Owner

Don’t restrict your relationships to owners; get to know all of the players in your market. Build friendships with designers, engineers, potential subcontractors, and stakeholders. All of them play an important part in a project’s outcome. These individuals will provide helpful insight into specific construction challenges and innovative construction related to their field, be it directly related to a pursuit or not.

Be Authentic

There’s no need to assume a persona when getting to know your clients. Be yourself, treating all with respect and courtesy. The more authentic you are, the more you will earn their trust. There will be times when you and another person just don’t “click.” Don’t force this relationship; pass it along to one of your co-sellers to build if it is important to maintain.

Build Relationships that Last a Lifetime

There is no art to preselling; it automatically happens as you get to know someone. In addition to being personally rewarding, they will make your professional life much easier. With the knowledge you gain over the years of getting to know a specific client, you will be better prepared to develop a specific proposal that presents specific understanding of an owner’s pain and how to solve it. In today’s market, that knowledge will distinguish you from a competitor as owners put a price on the added value you bring.

(1) “To Improve Sales, Pay More Attention to Presales,” Harvard Business Review, Feb. 17, 2015.

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