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**Don't Be "Pleased" or "Excited"** *By Rich Burns*

The most valuable real estate in your proposal is the cover letter, and the most valuable part of that letter is the opening sentence. Why, then, do most firms treat it as a throw away? I have the chance to review a lot of proposals, and I am continually struck by the bland, irrelevant statements that open most letters. Consider this compilation of opening lines from a recent proposal audit.

- *We are very excited to present our proposal for services to team with you ...*
- *Thank you for the opportunity to present our background and qualifications for ...*
- *It has been a pleasure working with you to develop ...*
- *We are honored to submit our qualifications to provide architectural services for...*
- *Thank you for this opportunity to continue our relationship with...*
- *It is a special privilege and honor to be invited to submit our qualifications for your new ...*
- *We are pleased to submit our credentials for ...*

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**Winning Public Projects - Don't Sabotage Your Own Efforts** *By Julie Olson, FSMPS*

“TWENTY-TWO PROJECTS COMPLETE. THIRTY-SEVEN FAILURES!” This headline summed up the remarkable work of renowned artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who have literally wrapped up the art world. In their realm of art, failure does not mean the end to their reputation or their professional careers.

In the world of design, however, failing to complete 63% of projects undertaken would not only result in a loss of future work, it would likely end up in multiple lawsuits. In terms of professional services marketing, achieving success on barely one in three projects would, or should, be a cause for grave concern. When undertaking proposals, firms fret over the competition, analyze the fees, carefully plot milestones and potential delays, and address the local politics. Companies try to figure out which competitor has the inside track and how to minimize that team’s influence on the selection committee. There is a deep-seated fear that another firm will somehow sabotage their efforts.

Based on recent conversations with procurement officers for public projects it is more common, however, for design teams to sabotage their own efforts.

When selecting a design professional or team, a public owner’s primary concerns are to get the best available professional services for the taxpayers’

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## Business Development: Black Art or True Science?

by Karen Compton, CPSM

Depending on whom you ask, the answer to that question may vary. If we were in a product-based environment selling shoes or beverages, manufacturers would argue that sales is science. Based on the company's sole ability to define the target, identify and address needs, convince and communicate the benefit (inferred or implied) of the product, at price point everyone is willing to pay, sales would either increase or decrease.

So, why is this equation so difficult to define in our world of design and construction? The truth is, It's really not.

One of my colleagues drew the parallel this way, "Selling requires... 1. Understanding the client's most important problems, 2. Figuring out the best solutions for those problems, 3. Communicating that solution to the client and 4. Convincing [them] that the proposed solution will really solve their problem."

Upon closer evaluation, it would appear that the two concepts seem vaguely related. Assuming that we, as architects, engineers and other design professionals, have a deep and thorough understanding of the client (their demography) and that we are able to understand our client's most pressing issues and define a solution for them, then we are in sync with the product manufacturing analogy. But, it is in the next step where the wheels fall off of the bus.

It is not sufficient to define one's problems and proposed solutions, if one is unable to communicate and compel a client to the point of decision. However, schools and colleges have failed to train our rising professionals in the art and science of sales, relegating the word "sell" to the category of four letter words to be banished from our profession. But without the ability to sell, our firms perish. PSMJ consultant Charles Nelson said it best, "Our main role is to teach our staff everything they need to know to run this business in the future." That includes sales.

The ability of project managers and technical professionals to clearly and effectively articulate thoughts or ideas based on an understanding of one's problem is not an art. It is a skill that must be practiced on colleagues within firms and mastered on clients. Moreover, convincing someone that they need (not just want) your firm's design or engineering solution must be met with equal conviction. So, where do we begin?

Project managers and other technical staff charged with the responsibility of business development should understand that their goal is not to do direct sales. Rather, it is to tell stories that illustrate their ability to identify problems and demonstrate solutions to their demographic. But, by all means, provide them with a safe environment in which to practice their skill development—in-house case study presentations, in-house lunch and learns, and charrettes all offer supportive environments for staff to practice the science of sales. ■

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## Marketing Tool of the Month 6 Guaranteed Visual Aid Failures

After a few presentations, they all begin to look alike. Visual aids can help a firm stand out during a presentation, but tread cautiously. The right (or wrong) visual aid can ensure a lost interview as easily as it can help boost one presenter to the top tier. Below are six sure-fire ways to guarantee that your visual aid leaves a bad impression with the selection panel.

- 1. It is Inaccurate:** There is no excuse for inaccurate information on a visual aid. We recommend that someone outside of the marketing group and the immediate project team review the presentation and visual aid(s) for accuracy.
- 2. It is Inadequate:** Using an inadequate visual aid is a red flag of things to come if you're hired. It points to poor communication and rushed decision-making.
- 3. It is Outdated:** The world is moving at a dizzying pace, and so might your prospective client's project. Never provide a visual aid with old information, or even with an out-of-fashion visual style.
- 4. It is Unclear:** The point of a visual aid is to help clarify the oral and other supporting material in your presentation. If a visual aid is not clear to the audience, and you have to over-explain it, then you probably shouldn't have used it.
- 5. It is Unnecessarily Complicated:** If you must display a complicated visual aid, begin with a simplified version, and slowly add to it, helping the audience build their understanding of the complexity. Showing them a complex visual all at once will overwhelm them.
- 6. It is a Poor Quality:** Today's ever-increasing advanced technologies efficiently generate high quality visual aids with minimal effort. You can't afford to use visuals that are less than first rate. ■

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## "Thank you for the opportunity..."

by Dave Burstein

"Thank you for the opportunity to submit this proposal." How many proposal transmittal letters have you started with this sentence? It's probably the most common opening sentence we've seen. But let's think about it. Exactly what are you thanking them for? The opportunity to pull your best people off paying projects so they can devote time and their best thinking for free?

When we spend our hard-earned cash and scarce resources to write an unpaid proposal, we are doing the potential client a favor. So the question to ask (before you decide to submit) is, "Is this opportunity worthy of our investment?" You may find yourself submitting a lot fewer proposals and winning more of the ones you decide to go after. ■

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