

BQ

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HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY

Tales, insight, opinion
& straight-talking from
Bid Industry Experts

EXCLUSIVE!

Martin Smith

Discusses the 'definitely-
maybe' scenario

PROPOSAL MANAGEMENT

Jon Williams

on the importance of storytelling

PRICING & COMMERCIAL

Peter Bryans

"We will bid this,
and bid as best
as we can."

CREATIVE

Simon Wellstead

3 Words:

Want. It. More.



PUBLIC SECTOR

Andy Haigh

Hope never triumphs
over experience

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HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY

Tales, insight and opinion from Bid Industry Experts

I'm fascinated by space and especially space travel. What could be out there? What is out there? Where does it all start and end because surely it must? Or must it? As I send my brain into some kind of cosmic meltdown contemplating these mind-bending questions, one thing I never lose hope of is that one day I might be able to travel into space.

Sure, I could sell my house and buy a ticket on Virgin Galactic, but that's just not going to happen. Maybe in my lifetime some cheaper option will surface? The point is, although I'd love to go into space, I have no real strategy for getting there. But do I lose hope that it might happen? No way - because it might just happen one day. It's what I would call a 'definitely-maybe' scenario. Enough ambiguity and uncertainty to give me hope. And if anyone tells me otherwise, I give them a cursory glance that says why can't hope be a strategy?

We couldn't submit a response because we would need to fully understand their needs, challenges and issues much better

That to me is why 'hope' can often be such a double-edged sword. As a seasoned bid professional I regularly tell my team and clients alike that hope should never be a strategy. I'd go as far as to say it's non-negotiable in our office. Yet hope is such a fundamental aspect of our daily lives that it seems natural to let it influence our thinking in all aspects of our work and home life. The contradictions it presents are sometimes so intertwined that it can be difficult to distinguish what is possible from what is purely aspirational.

Nobody likes the guy who pops all the balloons at a party so in an attempt to get some balanced opinion on this subject matter I canvassed the views of several Bid Solutions Industry Expert panel members. What I received back, and the basis for this article, was some fascinating insight, opinion, and tales from Simon Wellstead, Peter Bryans, Andy Haigh and Jon Williams. Did we all agree? Yes and no! It certainly opened my mind to different possibilities around hope as a strategy.

On both occasions it was as if the tender was written for us. Right in our sweet spot. It wouldn't have been difficult or time consuming for us to complete responses. Surely either was worth a punt? We were providing services to their competitors and knew their markets incredibly well. We knew we were very competitive on price and offered great service. But that one burning question we couldn't answer... why us? Why had they sent the RFP to us? Why would they spend money with a business they had never spoken to before, let alone worked with?

Not wanting to break my golden rule, and without being able to define a clear win strategy for either RFP, I did the sensible thing. I wrote to both of the respective procurement professionals and stated that whilst we welcomed being on their RFP distribution list, we couldn't submit a response because we would need to fully understand their needs, challenges and issues much better. I wouldn't want to insult them with a simple marketing document that talked about our own capability and attempted to match it to the RFP.

Letters sent, I waited. And waited. Nothing came back. Not even an acknowledgement of my letter despite following up several times.

Some would argue that's because we didn't follow the RFP instructions so it was our fault. I would argue it was the correct decision not just for us but also for the client - our chances of winning would have been based purely on hope and a guessing game as to what the clients real drivers were.

Of course, many would argue that in public sector bidding this is the best starting point you ever get. Andy Haigh however (our Public Sector Expert), argues very differently in his thoughts below. But first, Simon Wellstead explains why hide and seek should never be a game played in the corporate boardroom...

MARTIN SMITH

Managing Director at Bid Solutions



In the corporate world, it can often be hard to stem the flow of hope once an RFP arrives. I can recall one particular manager in a previous life who liked to openly accuse anyone who questioned the possibility of us winning as being a 'glass half full' kind of person – and everyone was fearful of being tarnished with that brush. The truth is that this type of sales leadership often results in a lot of wasted effort and resource.

Twice in the past 12 months I have been sorely tempted to break my golden rule of never bidding for business when an RFP has landed on our desk without prior warning. Business development has to start somewhere, right?



SIMON WELLSTEAD

Bid Solutions Marketing Expert & Director at SMSW Media

WANT IT MORE.

There is one last true competitive advantage in the bid world that many fail to utilise. I cannot profess to know the ins and outs of bid writing, or writing of any kind, however, I do know that answering the questions well, getting the commercials right and making sure you tick all the boxes will not cover all the potential bases required to make sure that you are selected.

When the process is finished a decision needs to be made, and like any decision there will always be an emotional element to it. What is their reputation like and do we believe their claims? Will they be easy to work with? Are their values aligned with ours? Do we like them?

I live by the motto that if people like you then they will find excuses to give you the business. When you have answered the final question on the submission don't hang your boots up just yet. There are a couple of big questions that still need to be answered. Have we injected our personality into this? Will we be likeable? Do we show that we want it more?

This is more than how the bid looks; while this is important it has more to do with how you show your personality.

How we show personality is where the creative thinking comes in. Yes you can say you are innovative, but where in the document have you shown it? Yes, you can say that you have the best talent in the industry, you can say that you go the extra mile, you are flexible and agile, you are transparent, you provide real return on investment, that you can deliver...but where in the bid have you really shown it?

I remember being sat in a kick-off workshop a few years ago and they were talking about all the great things they could deliver - all the next generation products they could provide. They were the incumbent supplier and when I quizzed them about the relationship it was less than perfect. Over the past 10 years of the contract agreement they had fallen short on more than one occasion. They felt they had to talk about innovation and next-gen products because that was what message the competitor would be driving. They had no intention of mentioning the past and hoped the customer wouldn't bring it up.

It didn't make sense to me - it felt like they were children playing hide and seek with their eyes shut tight whilst continuing to stand in the middle of the room. They were hoping that nobody would notice.

I suggested that we should be absolutely clear that the relationship had not been perfect, that they had fallen short of expectations and that this was unacceptable. I suggested they shouldn't hide from these facts, but rather bring them to the forefront. We led with the strap-line "Our commitments will speak louder than our words" and throughout the document we used dividers to highlight the known and less obvious customer issues. We had a picture of the Heads of the Departments responsible for each issue with the action to fix it and a personal commitment.

10 dividers, 10 issues, 10 actions, 10 commitments and a head on the chopping block attached to it. We had an opening message from the CEO saying he was paying close attention to this contract and he himself made a series of commitments and signed off with his signature and his personal mobile number. It was real and honest, showing the customer that they weren't shying away from past mistakes but making firm commitments to move forward. You didn't have to search for that commitment either - it was intertwined in the creative design and copy throughout the document.

The competition did what we expected them to do - they rubbished us and made unsubstantiated claims and promises. Suffice to say after a CEO-to-CEO phone call they retained the business. The CEO said how refreshing it was to receive such an honest response.

Hope didn't come into it. There are many ways to show you want it more and many clever ways to substantiate your claims. This is why taking the principles of advertising, marketing and design into your bid process is, I believe the one last true competitive advantage you can have.

So at your next bid kick off session write "WANT IT MORE" on the whiteboard - this should be your strategy. If you don't think in this way then you better hope your competitors don't either.

Taking the principles of advertising, marketing and design into your bid process is, I believe the one last true competitive advantage you can have.

PETER BRYANS

Bid Solutions Pricing & Commercial Expert & Managing Director of *Enginace*



Hope is not a strategy, but what if it works? I remember a time when a tender document came in that was every bid manager (and bid team's) nightmare: insufficient time to respond,

no opportunity to ask clarification questions, fully fixed price, hellish terms and conditions (unlimited liability et al), unclear requirement meaning Operations couldn't define what would be needed, and being paid in a volatile currency. In short, it was near impossible to manage the commercial risk and to plan (and cost-model / price) to a level of certainty that meant a firm fixed price was viable and sensible. Added to this, the sales team didn't know anything about the requirement and we had received it through a random 'send to all' general enquiry channel.

Three bid-bingo phrases were stated very early-on by Executive Management: "got to be in it to win it", "this is a key strategic opportunity" and "you're a bid team, your job is to bid - so bid it". Of course those doing the bid didn't get closure pre-bid on "can we win?", "can we deliver?", "can we make money?" ... just a simple "get on with it".

With all of that in mind, the team did bid, did win, did deliver and did make money; a lot more money than planned. It also secured a valuable client for further work and further associated clients. A huge success story: it could be argued that this was simply on "hope" from the very beginning.

But how? It had all the hallmarks of a disaster or at least nugatory effort and the expense of goodwill and morale within the company. Quite simply – the bid team bonded together by forging a lead of each component part of the bid: bid lead, operations lead, project management lead, sales lead and bid finance lead (me). Each lead then picked their support team and on it went. The leads analysed and dissected the documentation and put forward what would work best and proposed viable offerings against the vague requirement. The submission was firm and decisive and put forward what the team were (sufficiently) comfortable with. It was hard work to get the bid in on time, but the offer was robust ... and won.

The conduct of the team was truly collaborative and supportive with the mind-set "no matter what we think of it, we will bid this, and bid this as best we can".

Coming back to the start: "Hope is not a Strategy"...in this instance it was, and it did go on to inspire a lot of other hopeful bidding – which was not successful and was nugatory. The lesson I have learned is that hope can be a strategy from time to time, but only in very rare instances.

The conduct of the team was truly collaborative and supportive with the mind-set "no matter what we think of it, we will bid this, and bid this as best we can".





Hope is not a strategy! You want to win a Public Sector contract and you know you are the best in the business. Then, out of pure luck, one of your team arrives with an opportunity to bid

for a Local Authority opportunity. The Local Authority's office is just down the road. The requirement is all about your sweet spots. Plus, you have a great reference in a Local Authority in the next county, where you are already delivering a greatly appreciated service.

ANDY HAIGH

Bid Solutions Public Sector Expert & Director at Sixfold International

So, all you have to do is write the reply demonstrating what a good product and service you have and hope your brilliance carries the day. Or is it?

Even more beguiling is when you have been delivering these products and services, and the contract comes up for routine retendering. Here the procurement team already knows how good you are so you don't have to prove that all over again. Or do you?

At Sixfold we often come across this, often after a competitor has taken the prize and we are asked to explain how it happened. How could our client, the "obvious" best in the market for the products and services, possibly have lost? Were there some shenanigans in the evaluation process or has something in the requirement that was missed. It often turns out that they put in a good response in terms of an explanation of the plan and the technology. Even the pricing was competitive. However, this was just not enough.

So how does the next best provider triumph in Public Sector contracting? It does so because it works the Public Sector procurement process. Public Sector tendering is highly rules based. Consequently, if you know the rules well and know how to finesse them, you can win even if your solution may be weaker and your price is higher.

Typically, the Public Sector evaluator is given a set of marking criteria and a numerical score that he or she can award for each response against the completeness of the answer. To get a maximum score, the answer must hit every nuance of the criteria. As an example, here is a recent Local Authority scoring guidance for a maximum points award:

Outstanding: The response covers all elements of the criterion, and associated specified framework requirements and standards; and with a high level of relevant and detailed information, backed up with clear evidence; and demonstrates a robust and coherent understanding of the council's requirements; and with no issues, weaknesses or omissions.

To get top marks it needs a good technical description of what will be provided – we are all good at doing this and covering all the elements. However, how often is the evidence and demonstration of understanding so well prepared? Yet, if this is not tackled with the same enthusiasm as the technical issues, it will be difficult to score more than "average".

In Public Sector procurement, our experience is that hope does not triumph over experience.

Moreover, it is not possible to hope that a good reputation or a marketplace position will carry the day. The evaluator may not take this into account unless it is written down as part of a required answer. If he or she tries to rely upon anything else but your written response, they will open up the whole procurement to challenge. No procurement officer would do that. Indeed, it is more important to get the process right than to get the best product or service.

In Public Sector procurement, our experience is that hope does not triumph over experience. And it is our experience that only half a winning response is about the technology and the solution. Our rule of thumb; half the words for the solution and half for the assurance the evaluator needs to give full marks. Just because you are "best" this will never guarantee success.

And the most important advice of all is that even if you know all this, it won't happen unless you embed this understanding into all your bid processes. So if you are prone to thinking "Yeah, I know all this" (which is often my reaction when I read articles like this), think again. What you should be thinking is "Yeah, I know all this - but does everyone else in my bid team know it, and will they act upon it?" If the answer to these questions is "Yes", you must be winning most of your bids. If not, then it's time to stop hoping.



JON WILLIAMS

Bid Solutions Proposal Management Expert & Managing Director of *Strategic Proposals*

Many years ago, I presented at one of APMP UK's earliest conferences on the topic of proposal strategy. To illustrate my speech, I used a photo of my son Benedict - then aged four. He'd asked me: "What do you do at work, Daddy?"

Now, as a proposal manager, I struggle to explain what I do for a living when introduced to new people - say, friends of friends, at dinner parties. So what on earth do you say by way of explanation to a child? My off-the-cuff answer: "I go to work to help business people tell stories."

A little over a year ago, I was asked to step in at short notice to present at that year's conference - discussing changes I'd seen in our profession since I was the association's first CEO back in 2001.

Amidst lots of developments, as organisations have increasingly started to understand the critical importance of their proposal functions, I permitted myself the use of one slide on something that hadn't changed.

Benedict. Aged four (now seventeen, doing his A Levels, and woefully unimpressed by me using old family snaps in my presentations!). See, the need for a compelling proposal strategy isn't new. My colleague BJ Lownie coined the landmark phrase: "Why us, why not them?" And if you can't answer that before you start to write - or pitch - you're relying on hope: that the client will somehow, maybe, possibly, decipher reasons to choose you.

One of the earliest big bids I helped a client to win was in the IT sector. The feedback from the buyers at the end? "You won because you made it easy for us to sell you internally!" We have to not only convince the evaluators - but equip them to tell our story too.

So, careful and creative review of the three Cs is called for every time:

The Customer: the context for the bid; their drivers and anticipated benefits; our ever-popular "Spice Girls" question - "tell me what they want, what they really, really want"

Your Capability: to take them on the journey that underpins any good story - from "once upon a time" (where are they now) to "happily ever after" (visualising success, and the value we will have unlocked)

The Competition: via a bidders' comparison matrix (and / or other similar tools).

And from that? Why on earth would they choose you, ahead of the other doubtless capable, professional, hungry bidders.

When I used Benedict's photo at the most recent of the two conferences I mentioned earlier, I then played a little game. You might like to try it yourself...

Think of a recent proposal you've submitted. Grab a pen. In ten seconds, write down the three reasons the customer would have chosen you.

How did you fare?

If you struggled a little, that suggests you might need to give a little more thought to your proposal strategy next time around. If you passed with flying colours, here are the further tests:

- Would all of your colleagues working on the bid pass the test: would they have come up with the same three times, almost instantly?

- Would the customer be able to recite the same three messages?

- The real test: had your nearest competitor known that you were going to tell that story, and believed you could have brought it to life, would they have 'no bid'?

The good news? This is one of the fun parts of the process. And it's something that salespeople really get instinctively, even if they may need some training to focus on it properly in a proposal context.

The bad news? Most people in the room failed the test. It's time to get serious about strategy, folks, if you're committed to retaining and winning business in 2017. Mere 'hope' really isn't enough.

We have to not only convince the evaluators - but equip them to tell our story too.

So, can hope ever be a strategy?

I do believe that hope has a place in bidding, despite my reluctance to accept it as a strategy. However, it must be grounded in an understanding of the client's needs, solid value propositions and a sense of realism. Only then do I believe it will bear fruit on a consistent basis. Hope based on delusion, false assumptions and anecdotal evidence must be called out early in the bid process to avoid simply making up the numbers.

In the context of all this expert advice and real world insight, do I still believe that my strategy of hope could one day get me in to space? It pains me to admit it but I can see the flaw in my own optimism - it's certainly possible, just not that probable!

However, hope certainly has the power to motivate so I'm not ready to give up just yet...



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A STRATEGY**

Need help and advice?

Ask one of our experts at bidsolutions.co.uk/bid-hub

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