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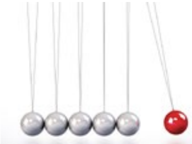
NCA APMP NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA

EXECUTIVE summary

Spring 2015 | Volume 22, Issue 2

This Issue's Theme: **Pricing Strategies – Pricing Proposals In An Increasingly Competitive Market**

Inside:





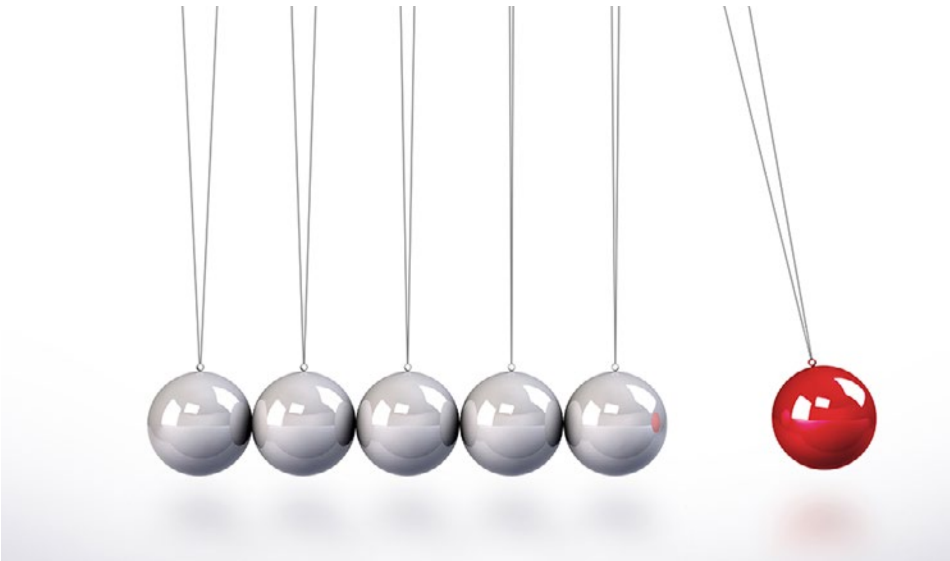

A Publication of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals (APMP) National Capital Area (NCA) Chapter

President's Corner

If You Don't Stand Out From The Competition, It Becomes A Battle Of Price

by Maryann Lesnick, CP APMP, APMP-NCA President

When an offer cannot be distinguished from the competition, human nature is to fall back on price. The result is that we find ourselves in a price war, which means disaster for all involved. Lower price means lower profit margins, which means less money to reinvest in training, R&D, innovation and distinction. It leads to poor quality and dissatisfied customers. Yet we see this war going on all around the Beltway.



The answer?

Submit a proposal that stands out from the competition. Sell your distinction rather than your price.

Perhaps one of the hardest aspects of our industry is coming up with real differentiators to cite in our proposals. In his book, "Collapse of Distinction. Stand out and move up while your competition fails," Scott McKain suggests that we spend too much time trying to duplicate and outdo what our competition does. When we compete rather than emerge a differentiated leader in our field, we are driven by the competition and not by the customer. McKain says that to have an advantage, we must pay more attention to what the customer wants than to what the competition is doing.

Have you been caught in this trap? The competition creates a point of distinction, so you duplicate it and try to do it even better. Each competitor introduces incremental changes to outdo the other. You end up mutually destroying points of differentiation. You are competing against each other rather than for the customer.

Then a new player joins the game with a new technology or service. Not only are you non-differentiated from the existing competition, but now there are new players in the game offering something faster and cheaper!

Another destroyer of differentiation is customer boredom. You believe the customer can't live without you; that you have a good relationship and successful past performance. McKain warns that familiarity breeds complacency. Complacency is the plague of the incumbent. The customer becomes bored with the same approach and technique. Then when someone comes in with something new and exciting – the customer is intrigued and moves on.

When we take something for granted, we are no longer growing and cultivating it.

What have you done differently for your customer in the past year?

McKain says you must create your own points of differentiation. You must be a leader in solving the customer's problem in some unique way. Find out what is behind the curtain – what keeps the customer up at night? Then create small, solid points that are recognized as different and important from the customer's perspective.

Michael Porter (in his book "Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance") says differentiation involves creating a point of uniqueness that, in turn, creates viable benefits diverse from the benefits of your competitors.

McKain suggests it is better to compete with yourself than have someone else do it. The company that is not always striving for the next innovation, the next improvement over what it already does, will eventually fall behind. Extinction comes when we believe we control a market.

How many of us write proposals that promise to "meet customer requirements"? Yet how many companies know what customer requirements really are, let alone how to meet them? What we are really promising is to meet engineering standards, apply best practices, etc. That is actually conformance to requirements. It is not differentiation. It is not distinction.

How many have included "value added" inducements in a proposal? What does that mean? Does that mean you failed to give the customer what they wanted in the first place and are now willing to add it to your offer?

If you are truly connected to your customer, McKain says that providing significant and distinct value through your products and services is an integral part of every action. It is not something you add.

How many customers have you talked with in the past year? In the past 5 years? Listening to the customer pays off.

To provide genuine service delivery and quality, we must ask our customers what they require, what they expect, and what they consider good service. And we must keep asking them. Then, we must identify ways to uniquely support our customer's needs.

Conclusion: Fight the Collapse of Distinction in your organization. Center your efforts on strategic differentiation through a customer – rather than competitor – focus. Let's keep winning!

Maryann Lesnick, CP APMP, PMP, CSM - Principal Consultant with Lohfeld Consulting Group, has more than 30 years of technical, management, and BD experience. Currently the APMP-NCA Chapter President, Maryann served as the 2012 and 2013 Vice President, as the APMP-NCA 2011 Logistics Chair, and on the APMP-NCA Boot Camp Committee for three years (2008, 2009, 2010), serving as Boot Camp Chair 2010. Maryann is a Practitioner Level APMP certification mentor, an ACT-IAC Fellow, a CMMI Level 2 Internal Assessor, ISO 9000 Internal Auditor, certified Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS), and holds a BS in Mathematics and Master's Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. mlesnick@lohfeldconsulting.com

Getting Value From Your Membership

The APMP-NCA Chapter has made investments the past two years in our infrastructure, most noticeably the apmpnca.org website. Our new structure is much easier to navigate and to maintain. If you haven't visited it lately, here are a few things to check out:

1. Want to improve the prospects for success with your next proposal? Tap our Body of Knowledge for more than a decade's worth of educational presentation notes, our Executive Summary e-zine.
2. View videos of past Speaker Series events.
3. Did you miss one of our Webinar Series? They are recorded and available in our Body of Knowledge.

You will find a number of additional resources in our Body of Knowledge about this quarter's eZine topic. Here is a sampling:

- Lessons in Cost Reduction (Gary Lyles)
- The (Still Important) Role of Value in a Least-Price World (Randy Richter)
- Price Matters! Strategy in Developing a Winning Price (Marsha Lindquist)
- Price Always Matters (John Foley)
- Understanding the Cost/Price Volume (Shlomo Katz)
- Pricing to Meet the Challenges of Today's Federal Market (Richter, Lyons, Campbell)
- Price to Win Best Practices (D. Nellany)

Other resources available to you include our Social Media sites:

1. LinkedIn discussion group
2. LinkedIn Company page
3. Facebook
4. Twitter

Finally, if you would like to be on our email list for announcements and our popular 5 Fact Friday, use the sign-up link on the apmpnca.org home page.

Lessons In Cost Reduction Part I

by Gary Lyles

With an ever-increasing emphasis and focus on cost and price in federal government contracting, companies must be cognizant of cost and price – putting policies and processes in place to submit sound pricing. In this article, I will share a few lessons in cost reduction that are essential to remaining competitive in today's marketplace.

LESSON 1: Examine your benefit structures to ensure that your total compensation supports your business today as well as in the future.
Businesses are often built on the foundation of the abilities of a small number of individuals who are both very good at what they do and are of strategic value to the organization. Companies tend to develop robust benefits packages in order to retain these key individuals. As the business expands over time, these benefits packages remain in place for all employees. We at n8 have examined businesses in which the entire staff was being paid 20 percent bonuses regardless of their performance or employees were immediately 100 percent vested in a 401K program. These benefits may have made a great deal of business sense to attract and retain key strategic personnel and created a marvelous discriminator at one time, but in today's cost conscious marketplace, these practices are simply not competitive.

LESSON 2: Develop rates that are specifically tailored to the requested scope of work and sensitive to the job market location by using competitive labor rate analysis.
Businesses use market salary data to get an idea of prevailing market hourly wages for a labor category. In addition, businesses should take advantage of the ceiling labor rate pricing data available at sites such as gsaadvantage.com, published rate cards on existing government or commercial contracts, and through FOIA requests to provide additional data points to help mitigate any outliers during analysis of direct labor rates. Businesses should also leverage their recruiting department to gather real time data regarding the local job market, the skills of the potential employment pool, and the actual wages and benefits required to hire and retain staff. Finally, take a relook at the current staff wages to ensure they are in line with the marketplace and locality. With today's ever-rising costs, paying individuals more than required is not competitive.

LESSON 3: Control your costs in the out years of a contract through a combination of promotion, off-loading and greening.
By the nature of our jobs, we expect to get increased direct or indirect compensation each year to adjust for higher expenses and the idea that another year of experience equates to more value. This expectation creates a challenge because it means businesses must charge their customers more each year. This is typically reflected in cost and pricing via escalation. However, escalated costs are still increases and to be competitive we would like to decrease our costs or at least maintain them at the same

level. To accomplish this seemingly impossible decrease, companies must examine contract management in the out years.

Attempting to model the future workforce in future years of a contract, i.e., how the workforce will change over time, is one of the more sophisticated activities in cost and price modeling. The model should take potential personnel changes such as attrition due to retirement or dismissal, promotion into a higher position either on or off the contract, hiring to backfill departing staff, and changes in staff mix due to changing contractual requirements into account. Even though it requires detailed planning, workforce modeling demonstrates our understanding of the program lifecycle and the careers of our employees. Managing personnel changes is one of the ways in which companies can control out year costs and remain competitive.

LESSON 4: Control your indirect costs by creating new cost pools for work that does not benefit from the support offered in your current pools. Businesses often grow into functional areas adjunct, but not necessarily part of their original core business. For example, a software development company over time may have a growing business in software maintenance and support. As a result, it may pursue contracts in these new functional areas. Since the skill sets are somewhat different, it may make sense to create new cost pools that focus on the needs of the business in the new areas. If the market for your help desk staff does not offer the same benefits as you provide for your software developers, then it is time to look a separate benefits packages. If the overhead needed to manage one type of work is significantly different from that for another type, consider a separate overhead pool. Ensuring that indirect cost pools are properly aligned with the work being performed, allows companies to bid competitively.

Managing personnel changes is one of the ways in which companies can control out year costs and remain competitive.

LESSON 5: Use subcontractors and consultants smartly to reduce your overall costs.

Selecting subcontractors and consultants is often critical because they bring customer intimacy and specialized skills needed when formulating a team. Another good reason is a subcontractor or consultant may be able to perform more cheaply or more efficiently. In either instance, if a subcontractor or contractor can perform a quality service at a better price point than you can, consider adding them to your team. Companies also need to be smart about how they burden subcontractors. n8 Consulting has had clients who burden their full overhead and/or G&A on their subcontractors and lament that the subcontractors are too expensive. We often suggest a separate cost pool isolating subcontract management costs and applying this as a burden to subcontractors. Strictly speaking, this does not reduce the overall cost, but it does align them better with cost objectives and provides a perception to your customer that you are competitive.

Check APMP-NCA updates for Lessons in Cost Reduction Part II!

Gary is the founder and Managing Principal of n8 Consulting, a proposal development company specializing in cost estimation and pricing. He is a seasoned consultant and entrepreneur backed by a broad background in technology, program management, strategic planning and business development gained over a 35-year career. He is recognized for his excellent qualifications as a cost and pricing lead on large and challenging engagements. He can be contacted at gary.lyles@n8-consulting.com or 703.819.9340.

Fun Fact...

Squirrels plant thousands of new trees each year simply by forgetting where they put their acorns

Ask the Graphics Guru

What Are Your Favorite Pricing Strategies?

by Mike Parkinson, CPP APMP Fellow

Price can be the difference between a win and a loss. RFPs place a different weight on pricing but all RFPs require price realism to win (or a high price is paid for all involved). Over the years I have seen several successful pricing strategies. The following are two pricing strategies that worked very well for me and my clients:

1. Shape the RFP.
2. Prove best value.

1. Shape the RFP.

A colleague who works for a large financial institution was tracking a bid for a program that audited financial information. His customer needed a staff of 160. Ten of the 160 were critical to the program's success so he recommended a higher level of credentials for the ten. Due to his input, his customer required 20 years' experience and the highest-level credentials for the ten key positions, which meant that low-cost solution providers could no longer compete. The new specifications eliminated 90% of his competitors and ensured a better outcome for his customer. He made certain that the RFP placed as much weight as possible on his company's differentiators—expertise and the resulting quality of service and product.

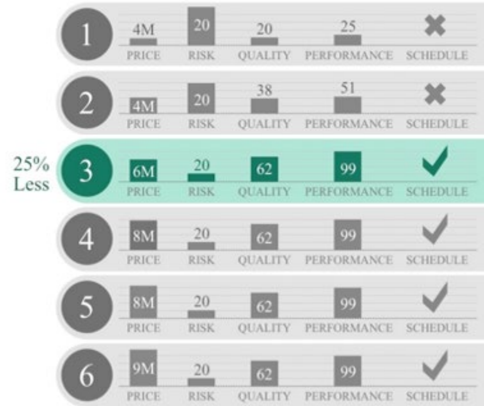
If the RFP favors your strengths, it minimizes at least one of the challenges associated with developing your price. Now you can focus on your customer's budget and the competition's pricing strategy.

I regularly interview evaluators, decision makers and influencers. When asked, almost all said that they appreciated budget inquiries and insight into improving the RFP. They know that a better RFP results in better proposals and a better outcome.

2. Prove best value.

This strategy assumes that the RFP is not heavily weighted toward low price and is not an LPTA (Low Price Technically Acceptable) bid.

To prove best value, bidders need to explain how you determined best value while convincing the customer that the proposed solution is better than other options. One of the best ways to do this is in the pricing volume. I measure the key evaluation variables used to determine value (e.g., price, risk, quality, performance, and schedule). I show how I calculated the metrics for each and then present the different scenarios tested. I select the winning scenario and highlight why it is best value. Above is a graphic showing a comparison of the scenarios tested.



Customers are risk adverse. The cost of poor contract performance is high. They are afraid of making the wrong decision. Quantitative evidence that shows your measurements and calculations empirically validates your assertions and helps allay your customer's fears.

Conclusion

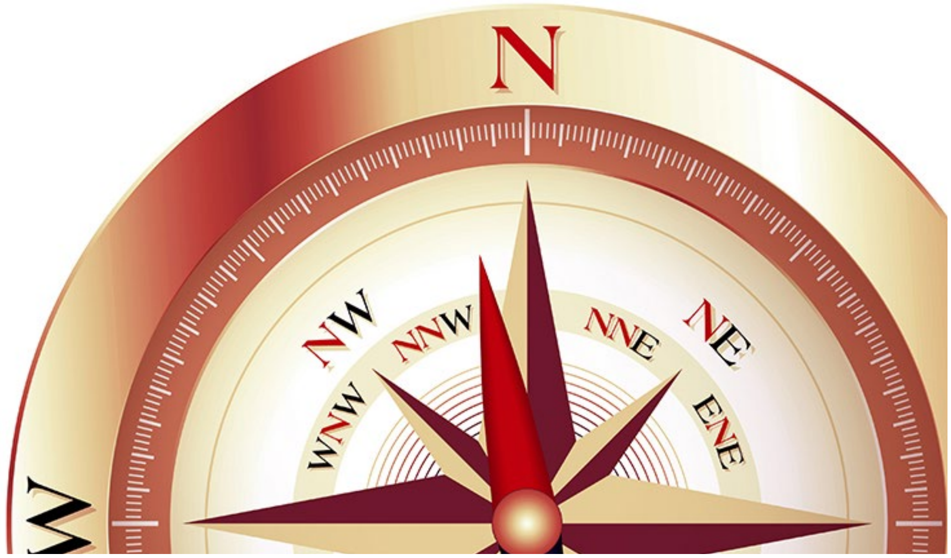
Because pricing can impact winning to a high degree, I recommend tackling it as early as possible during the procurement lifecycle. Make pricing a priority to uncover disconnects, shape the RFP (and the proposed solution) and allows time to adjust should an issue arise.

Mike Parkinson, PPF.APMP, is an internationally recognized visual communications guru and proposal expert, professional trainer, and award-winning author. He is a partner and head of marketing at 24 Hour Company (24hrco.com) specializing in bid-winning proposal graphics. His Billion Dollar Graphics website (BillionDollarGraphics.com) and Get My Graphic website (GetMyGraphic.com) share best practices and helpful tools with professionals. Contact Mike at mike@24hrco.com or call 703-533-7209.

Understand Your Business Goals And Price Accordingly

by Mike Walker, CPP APMP

> "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."
> – Lewis Carroll



This well-known rewording of an exchange between Alice and the Cheshire cat from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, rings true whenever we think about any business strategy. In other words, before devising a plan to achieve our goals we must have a clear understanding of what those goals are. Whether your business is in the early stage of growth or is a long-established company with a successful record of accomplishment, each proposal requires a specific pricing strategy. Here are a few of the prevailing business objectives to consider when pricing proposals:

Maximize Revenue. Management teams of newly formed businesses or business units like to build a business plan that follows the classic "hockey stick" revenue growth model. The idea is to invest in the business in the short term, which may result in negative cash flow, then count on future growth to drive the business to scale. Businessmen commonly joke that "We lose money on every sale, but we'll make it up on volume." Of course, we can all see the folly in this kind of thinking, but in the early stages of building a business, a focus on revenue growth may be essential to cover fixed overhead costs. Large businesses focus on revenue growth for other reasons: to increase market share, push out competitors, and/or to attract investors. In the long term, however, all companies must be profitable to survive.

Maximize Profit. Who wouldn't want to maximize profits? The real question for proposal teams is what exactly constitutes a profit? Is it simply program revenue minus your fixed and variable costs? What about the opportunity costs? How much will you spend on business development, capture, and proposal development to pursue the opportunity? And don't forget the working capital that will be tied up in the project should you be successful. How else might you employ your money? These are important considerations in any bid/no-bid decision. In order to fuel real growth and maximize profit over the long-term, companies must invest in some competitive advantage - that is the unique characteristics and discriminators that make your company stand out, and convince your customers to want your product or service over your competitors.

Gain Qualifications. Barriers to entry often include a lack of credible qualifications or experience in a particular field, with a specific customer, or market sector. Obtaining those qualifications by partnering with or acquiring another company, hiring specialist personnel, or offering low introductory prices, may open the door to previously unreachable markets. These strategies don't come without some risk, however. Partnerships may involve loss of autonomy, conflicts of interest, doubling of overhead costs, and a negative impact on your reputation. Acquisitions are notoriously time consuming and resource intensive and can distract management teams from their core business functions. Underbidding on contracts may lead

> We often hear unsuccessful proposal teams say, “We lost on price,” as if that aspect of the proposal was outside of their control.

to a failure to deliver the products or services promised at the quality and/or quantity bid, and in some cases may even risk legal liability under the False Claims Act.

Market or Project Positioning. Every so often, a contract opportunity comes along that is a precursor to a much larger, more attractive opportunity. The initial contract becomes a “must win” for the company. It allows a successful bidder to make a favorable impression, to gather valuable customer and program intelligence, and perhaps even to influence the requirements for the larger opportunity to come. In this situation, companies must beware of a potential conflict of interest due to unfair competitive advantage. Again, underbidding in order to win the initial contract may backfire if you are setting expectations you can’t sustain over the long term.

When you know what it is you are trying to achieve, selecting the right strategy becomes much easier. As always however, it is extremely important to know your customer. How do they evaluate cost proposals? What is their budget for this project? Are they willing to pay extra for value added items? Is this a lowest price, technically acceptable, bid? Equally important is having a good understanding of your competitors. What strategies might they employ? How can you ghost them in your price proposal narrative? Whatever pricing strategy you decide, you have to justify and support it – in the basis of estimate, in the features and benefits of your pricing approach, and by highlighting the risks in your competitors’ price proposals. We often hear unsuccessful proposal teams say, *“We lost on price,”* as if that aspect of the proposal was outside of their control. A more likely explanation is that the team didn’t really understand the requirement, failed to mitigate the risks in their technical or pricing approach, offered solutions that were inefficient or wasteful, or simply failed to explain and justify their price.

Mike Walker is an international business development consultant based in the Washington, DC area. He provides strategic planning, capture and proposal consulting services to clients in the USA, Canada, and the UK. Mike is a certified proposal professional and a member of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals (CPP APMP). Contact Mike at walker_ms@comcast.net or (410) 999-5379.

2015 APMP-NCA Mid-Atlantic Conference and Expo

APMP-NCA will hold our popular annual event on October 22, 2015 at the Waterford in Springfield, VA. This year’s theme is: ***Navigating the Procurement Obstacle Course***. The conference offers business development, capture, proposal and pricing tracks as well as a corporate sponsor expo. Mark your calendar now to attend the region’s largest gathering of proposal professionals. For further information and sponsorship opportunities, contact events@apmpnca.org.

APMP-NCA Mentorship Program Update

by Constance S. Dyson

It's finally spring and the mentors and protégés are in full swing connecting and doing new things. In March, Betsey Blakeney hosted a workshop on career development, entitled "Find Your Passion: Take Charge of Your Professional Development". This dynamic presentation covered many aspects of developing professionally and personally. Betsey talked about having a stay strategy, as well as an exit strategy upon assessing your level of satisfaction in your current role.

Some important points from Betsey's presentation included:

- Focus your energy on remaining a renewable resource
- Create your own survival plan – *"Will you stay or will you go?"*
- BYOD – Bring your own distinction

"You can do anything once you stop trying to do everything." (Eric Barker) was a key takeaway from Betsey's discussion on developing your career. Betsy also covered social media presence and resume review. This workshop was the first of several to be held exclusively for the mentorship group and was extremely useful as the group strives to achieve their individual development goals, set at the beginning of the year.

One particular pair to highlight is Thomas Harmon (Mentor) and Mitch Patterson (Protégé) who have set out to accomplish the feat of designing a BD Training Program within Mitch's company along with implementing a 'proposal center of excellence'. Since January, the pair outlined a detailed plan to meet these two major goals by the end of the year. *"Tom and I have made great progress since our last report. Through Tom's guidance and support I have hired two new resources for my team (Jr. Proposal Manager and BD/Marketing Lead) and have also hired two consultants to help us mature our processes and templates and to help us build our commercial strategy… Tom was able to help me shape the requirements and prioritize the positions to fill. In addition, he helped me to better understand, what skills to bring in house and what to outsource."* Mitch says of Tom's guidance. Mitch and Tom are focused on team training and planning the Center of Excellence next. *"I am very optimistic that Mitch is on the right track working with his executive leadership team. The complementary synthesis of skill and experience Mitch brought together in just 5 weeks is impressive, and built to ensure enduring success. These talented new hires are the core drivers of what promises to be a strong competitive culture for the company. Well done!"* says Tom.

Our other pairs have also found innovative ways to improve personal skills and/or processes that extend to their teams at work. Several Protégés have been promoted within their companies. Brett Ayote just obtained his Professional APMP certification. Mary Jane Prigge obtained her Foundation APMP certification. Stay tuned for more accomplishments from this eager and highly motivated group!

Constance Dyson, MBA, CP APMP, APMP-NCA Secretary, Senior Proposal Manager for Leidos in Reston, VA, has been an active member of APMP NCA since 2010. She's served as the Secretary since 2013, on the APMP-NCA Boot sub -committee in 2011 and 2012, and as one of the editors for the E-zine for three years. She is a visionary for strengthening the value of the APMP network and developed the mentorship program as a key benefit to its members to begin in late 2013 and led as the Mentorship co-chair.

APMP-NCA Panel: How To Beat A "Low Ball" Bidder

by Russell Smith, Speaker Series Chair

On Wednesday, March 18, the APMP-NCA Speaker Series featured a panel discussion on *"How to beat a 'low ball' bidder."* Lee Cooper served as moderator, with panelists Mike Gaffney, Gary Lyles, and Len Martinez.

Lee Cooper, Len Martinez, Gary Lyles, and Mike Gaffney – Photo by Marty Williams

First the distinction was made between LPTA and *"low ball"* bidding. In LPTA, if your response is compliant and reasonable, the award simply goes to the lowest bidder.

A *"low ball"* bid is a tactic of pricing a proposal very low. Large companies can set up low overhead cost centers to make this possible. Others will bid unrealistically low with the intent of later raising the price through change orders.

In today's climate, the government is under pressure to save money by choosing the lowest bidder. Even "best value" awards are subject to differences of perspective, and the low bidder will often break the tie. Hence, price is important in every situation.

Suggestions from the panel were to scrub the numbers carefully, have an outside independent review; and have enough client intimacy to know how low you can go.

A big problem for incumbents is the accretion of costs that happens with wage inflation as the workers on the program get more senior. Companies need to look at how they are promoting the staff, and work to retain the structure of the original bid by bringing in fresh, more junior resources to fill positions as others move up.

The panel felt that services contracts were more likely to get into price wars than commodities bids. In order to win services contracts you need to know the customer and act early – "way up front" – to be creative and jockey the program into the right mix of skills and levels to get the work done for a winning price.

Cost plus is the most difficult to price, because the Government has visibility into your complete price buildup. Fixed price is a black box, and the government likes it because it places the risk on the bidder.

If an RFP is loosely written, some companies study the RFPs to locate weaknesses that can be exploited in coming up with a low price. For example, not pricing things that are not explicitly called-out. Or reducing costs in each option year because of *"productivity improvements"* resulting from *"innovations."*

One way to fight a *"low ball bidder"* is to get the customer to require a Basis of Estimate (BOE) in the price proposal. This provides good insight into the weaknesses in the low price bids. Do your price to win analysis early. Most companies wait until too late. Only to later face problems they can't solve such as, a sub with costs that are too high.

Question from the floor: *"Can you teach the customer to go for higher price?"* You must have customer intimacy and help them do a risk analysis. Answer the mail in risk and ghost the competitors in the risk table or

One way to fight a "low ball bidder" is to get the customer to require a Basis of Estimate (BOE) in the price proposal.

technical proposal so the customer cannot forget the risk. The CO is risk aversive, so if you effectively ghost your competitor where they have risk, this can help you a lot. When you know of a weakness in the competitor solution, use the technique of saying, *"We considered this solution but chose another approach because . . . ."*

"If the incumbent knows his personnel costs are too high, does he refresh, reduce staff or what?" "Start working on the re-compete the day of the award." However, *"this is like flossing. You forget to do it until you are there in the chair with a cavity!"* If you start early enough, you can use attrition and bring people in and out from other contracts and end up with the right mix of skills and levels to win the re-competition. On the other hand, a company claiming they will hire the incumbents and still lower price may be viewed as a risk by the government.

"What can you do to expose the "false realism" of a low ball bidder?" Encourage the customer to put a sample task in the RFP. This helps open their eyes to problems with bidders going too low. Put a roadmap in the cost volume and the risk table. This will help the customer find proof of the soundness and low risk in your approach.

Russell Smith has been a proposal industry professional for over 35 years. For the past 30 years, he has been president of Organizational Communications Inc. (OCI), a leading proposal consultant firm. He has been a member of APMP for 20 years, previously serving as president of the NCA chapter and currently serving as Speakers Series Committee chairman. He completed the doctorate degree in education at the College of William and Mary and completed previous degrees at the University of Texas.

Fun Fact...

Google, the periodic table, the structure of our DNA, and "Yesterday" by the Beatles are all ideas that were conceived in dreams.

Note From the E-Zine Chair and Chief Editor, Sareesh Rawat, CF APMP

We are always looking to improve the E-Zine and would love to hear from you!

What did you think of this issue of the Executive Summary? What did you think of specific articles? Have questions, comments or suggestions for the authors or the editors? What articles, and themes would you like to see in future issues of the Executive Summary?

Please drop us a line at ezine@apmpnca.org or contact Sareesh directly at (301) 523-5157. We look forward to hearing from you!

APMP-NCA Board of Directors Meetings are Open to Members

The Board of Directors for APMP-NCA meets the first Tuesday of every month. Two out of every three meetings are virtual meetings. If you would like to join a meeting, contact us by going to http://www.apmpnca.org/contact/.

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