

HOW TO BUILD A WINNING BID TEAM

by Peter Bartram

When Cathedral Group, an urban regeneration specialist, was invited to pitch for a £50m contract to redevelop a major city centre site in Lewisham, south-east London, last year, it was up against two competitors – and had just eight weeks to submit its proposal.

Cathedral's challenge was similar to that faced by a growing number of companies that have to pitch for new business against well-resourced rivals. It's not enough to be good at what you do – you have to be good at winning business, too.

It's a problem that a larger number of sales and marketing managers need to address, not least because pitching for business is getting tougher all the time. One unwelcome trend is the growth in the numbers of companies invited to bid for contracts.

When marketing agency jpmh was invited to pitch for a £3m contract by Kraft Foods, it found itself up against 17 other agencies. And when Fresh, an events and video company, was invited by Matalan to bid for a £300,000 contract to run a conference, it discovered that nine other firms were also chasing the business.

In this ever-more competitive climate, it's not surprising that more sales and marketing directors are reviewing the skills of their bid teams. But research just published in a new book, *How to Build a Winning Bid Team** reveals that not all companies are as anxious to sharpen their skills as others.

In all, 62 companies across a range of industries were asked how keen they were to sharpen a menu of 20 different bidding skills from “making a winning presentation” to “developing and using reference sites”. Only 13 of the 62 companies showed a really strong desire to improve their bidding skills across the board, by scoring more than 75 per cent on the assessment. A further 30 companies scored between 50 per cent and 75 per cent of the total possible.

But three companies showed little interest at all in improving bidding skills. It seems likely that the low interest in improving bidding skills in at least some of these companies is not the result of superior world-beating performance, but the result of failing to appreciate the standards increasingly required to take on and beat determined competitors.

When it came to which skills the companies most wanted to improve, it was clear that sharp-end customer-facing skills were most important, (see boxout: Top 10 contract bidding skills). It’s not surprising that “making a winning presentation” topped the list as this is the point in the bidding process when contracts are often won or lost.

This is where sales directors get to showcase their company’s and product’s plus points - their superior product or service, the quality of the team that will be responsible for delivering and backing it up, and their company's reputation in the marketplace. The pitch can be the make-or-break moment for winning the contract, especially when the final choice comes down to two or three closely matched contenders.

In a winning presentation, the team needs to establish a real relationship with the people they’re presenting to. A winning presentation makes the client feel: these are people we want to do business with. The whites-of-their-eyes

factor may make all the difference between choosing one supplier over another.

This was certainly the case when Cathedral Group won the contract for the redevelopment project. Recalls Richard Upton, Cathedral Group's chief executive: "You may only have one hour to prove yourself at interview, so adeptness at communication and an ability to cut right to the point is vital. It is essential to be visionary: you must have the skill to develop a vision and then articulate it through the professional team so that you can convince people you know where the scheme is going."

Yet with the numbers invited onto bidding lists growing, there must be some sales and marketing directors wondering whether it's worth financing the resources to respond to all invitations to bid. Certainly, they need to be selective. But when they decide to go for a bid, they need to be serious about it and devote the resources that are needed. Half-measures are a waste of time.

When jpmh was chasing the Kraft Foods business alongside the 17 other agencies, it found it had to go through three distinct pitch stages – a request for information, a test of whether it had the right chemistry with Kraft and the pitch itself. At each stage, the numbers in the hunt for the business fell – from 18 to six after the request for information, and from six to three after the chemistry test.

Phil Harvey, jpmh chairman, reckons the key to the firm's success in winning the business was continuity. "There were two people driving the pitch," he says. "They were the same two people that would be responsible for

the business, were we to be successful - the relationship being built along the way was, therefore, not wasted on new business people.”

He adds: "Ultimately, the pitch itself was deemed much better than the competition. This is because there were no surprises. The strategy was right and the client knew it because they had been exposed to it throughout the process. They knew they could work with us, because they had already been doing so and they knew we were committed to the business because senior people were running the pitch."

At Fresh, director Nick Porter, says: “Key to successful pitching is making sure you fully understand the client’s brief. Deconstruct it and question every aspect of it. Only in this way can you get under the skin of the company and offer more than your competitors with a truly fresh approach.”

What’s clear from the research carried out for the book is that those companies which want to sharpen their competitive edge are focusing on their bidding skills as well as the quality of their products and services. But, as the winners have already discovered, improving skills is not a one-off task. Tomorrow’s winners will be those who commit themselves to a process of continuous improvement.

- *How to Build a Winning Bid Team: Practical Advice to Improve Key Skills that Help you Win More Business* by Carol Kennedy and Peter Bartram is published by New Venture Publishing. You can read the first chapter free online at www.buildabidteam.co.uk

BOXOUT

Top 10 contract bidding skills

- 1 Making a winning presentation
- 2 Defining product value in customer's terms
- 3 Learning how customer buying centres work
- 4 Building or redesigning a bidding process
- 5 Completing tender documents successfully
- 6 Finding and using competitive intelligence
- 7 Drafting proposals
- 8 Developing key messages about company and products
- 9 Managing the prospect relationship
- 10 Identifying potential new customers

Source: *How to Build a Winning Bid Team*