



Fact sheet – Early customer engagement to create winning bids and proposals!

Why bother with early customer engagement?

Many organisations seem to think there's no need to engage with customers prior to putting a successful bid/proposal together. The reasoning runs along the lines of, why not just wait for the ITT/RFP to come out? After all, the awarding body will know who you are, otherwise they probably wouldn't have asked you to bid in the first place. And, if it's a public sector ITT you're developing a proposal for, you've probably completed some form of PQQ or SQ, so they'll know all about you!

Well, you might have been lucky on a few occasions and won a competition, without some form of prior customer engagement. But industry best practice and experience tells us that this isn't normal at all! Indeed, it's far more likely that the winning organisation will have had some form of relationship with the customer for some time; an emotional connection, perhaps.

Quite simply, the norm is that those organisations who don't engage with customers prior to being asked to respond to an RFP/ITT, usually fail and fail badly. Consequently, some form of prior customer engagement must be the norm, if you stand any chance of raising your game in the bid and proposal world!

This fact sheet looks at some hints and tips to help you get this prior customer engagement up and running and how to use that engagement to help you create winning bids and proposals!

Early customer engagement in the proposal world is built on some general principles

Here are some general principles behind early customer engagement:

- Early customer engagement has a positive and informative impact on the development of a proposal
- Never rely on the fact that the customer knows who you are and what you're capable of delivering
- Don't leave customer engagement until when the ITT/RFP is delivered
- Plan customer engagement early and identify someone to take responsibility for the engagement planning
- Develop a formal process for customer engagement
- Use the BD team ruthlessly early on for intelligence gathering
- Allocate, or be prepared to use funds to develop engagement early
- Record every piece of information from every contact relating to a potential opportunity
- Use innovative ways of keeping your organisation in front of potential customers
- Know what value you can offer a potential customer, so that this can be promoted and tested often
- Use planning time/process to get internal colleagues on side.

Let's look at these principles in more detail.

Early customer engagement has a positive and informative impact on the development of a proposal

There is still a lot of truth in the saying that **'people buy people'**. Consequently, early engagement with a customer (also sometimes known as early position or capture planning) is crucial for many reasons. Here are a few ideas for you to consider:

- You can influence the customer's thinking, especially when they don't really have an idea of what they want. Indeed, if you get this right, and the customer relationship is solid, you might even be able to suggest potential solutions to customer problems or issues that they hadn't yet identified themselves. When these situations arise, emotionally the customer will have already decided that you're the organisation they want to work with, even after a formal ITT/RFP process is underway. Indeed, you may be able to help scope the ITT/RFP contents.
- Allied to this, you can develop a very strong feel for what's keeping customers awake at night; their **Hot Buttons** (HBs) as you'll hear colleagues describe them. You'll start to appreciate what's **really** important to the customer very early in the business development cycle. Again, if the relationship with the customer is right, they'll be more likely to confide in you and share details of their concerns. This knowledge can help you enormously to shape thinking and logic in the proposal.
- Forming this 'bond' with a customer increases the emotional decision-making process during evaluation. Suddenly, it becomes a competition for you to lose, rather than yours to win!

Naturally, all this activity and sentiment will feed across into the proposal development and will influence the approach on how to deal with key aspects within the document. For example, when answering questions in the proposal, you can take every opportunity to underpin and reinforce, not only how your solution will meet the customer's requirements, but also how you can mollify any concerns, worries or issues they may have. This is powerful, if you get it right!

Shipley run an excellent Capture Planning course, and this is highly recommended if your organisation wants to create a capture process or refine what you're already doing. Contact details for a discussion about this can be found [here](#).

Never rely on the fact that the customer knows who you are and what you're capable of delivering!

It's very rare for a customer to know everything about you, even if you're a household name. You may **think** they know all about you because they've asked you to bid. The message here is, don't assume the customer knows anything about you at all. There are several things you might consider:

- Your organisation may be highly innovative and could have developed a new offer or solution to a need, but does a potential customer know this?
- Do they know your track record in other contract deliveries?
- Are they aware of any initiative that you might be taking a lead in? e.g. environmental or social impact initiatives?
- Are they aware of where you're positioned in the sector, when compared to your known competitors?
- Are they aware of any awards you may have won?

The list isn't exhaustive, but this could be a good starting point to base an analysis on where you think you stand with a customer and/or their perception of you. You will need to 'lean' on the Business Development (BD) team to help you with this process. After all, they should be the people who have contact with the customer.

Don't leave customer engagement until when the ITT/RFP is delivered!

If you do, it's going to be too late! The main reason is that, in many instances, an ITT/RFP is sent out with a potential winner already in mind. Additionally, one of your competitors will probably have been assisting the purchasing organisation with the scope of the ITT/RFP. Therefore, in this situation, you will be in second place at best at this stage.

Moreover, you're always going to be on the 'back foot' throughout the proposal development process and none of the emotional aspects of customer engagement

activity will feed into the proposal. Yes, you may be able to meet the requirements exactly, but you'll never be able to demonstrate that you've understood what's important to the customer.

Additionally, you can't influence anything with the customer at all at this late stage. Chances are, you are only being asked to submit a proposal to create the competition; to be what's affectionately termed 'bid fodder' in the trade!

Lastly, you'll waste loads of resources, including cash, chasing an opportunity that you don't have much chance of winning!

Hence, leaving engagement this late is a recipe for disaster!

A key message to leave you with here is, if you haven't had any customer engagement before an ITT/RFP arrives, actively consider a 'no bid'.

Plan customer engagement early and identify someone to take responsibility for the engagement planning

Accepting that customer engagement is crucial and that it should happen very early, the next question might be, who should take responsibility to control this process? Should it be a BD person, the Bid Manager (BM) or some other appointed person?

The straight answer is that it doesn't really matter who takes control, if there is a process and a customer engagement plan can be developed. Some organisations will have proper Capture or Engagement Manager roles. Others will have ad hoc arrangements, where someone will dual role.

Once someone has been identified, a clear process needs to be put in place detailing how customer engagement will be planned and implemented. It's essential that the designated person has the delegated powers to make decisions on how to proceed with engagement.

Develop a formal process for customer engagement that everyone can follow

For those of you without any customer engagement process, now is the time to develop one! Don't worry, it doesn't have to be complicated.

Some of you might have what you consider to be 'engagement' via normal sales activity but ask yourself, is it proactive and aimed at really targeting people within your customer's organisation. If not, then this process needs reviewing. We are talking about a process that's highly specific and highly proactive; you and your organisation being in the driving seat.

Some principles for developing a good customer engagement process are as follows:

- Involve colleagues in developing a process and decide what the outputs should be from customer engagement. What is it you want to achieve from it?
- Have a process for scanning the 'horizon' early for new opportunities. Use the outputs from the engagement activities to influence this. As a norm, aim to keep a list of six opportunities going at once, and make detailed engagement plans for each. Within the process have a 'decision to pursue' procedure. This will kick start more detailed engagement planning.
- Develop a process where you can document everything. Some will want to use a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software program, but it isn't essential. The point is, you want a record of what contact you have made and what the outcomes were from the contact activity. Scraps of detail individually won't seem important, but collectively they will when reviewed by the person dealing with customer engagement. This is how you start to build up the more emotional aspects of a customer and their organisation.
- Develop an engagement plan template around areas such as a contact matrix of a customer's organisation. Here,

develop details of individuals and where/how these fit in to decision making/influencing activity. Include details of what you want to find out, by whom and by when. Include in the plan a process that allocates people to tasks and have a process for monitoring progress.

- Within the process have a distinct area where you can identify things that are important to the customer (Shipley call these Hot Buttons) and conduct a detailed competitor analysis. Treat this part of the engagement process very seriously and consider using colleagues to assume the role of competitor organisations to 'wargame' possible competitor actions within the opportunity. Put a process in place to complete tools such as a Shipley Bidders Comparison Matrix, or equivalent.
- Keep the engagement process under review and always seek to improve and refine it.

Use the BD team ruthlessly early on for intelligence gathering

Feed the customer engagement planning process into **all** BD activity, so that this can inform the engagement plan outputs. The BD team will normally have the best access to the customer. Hence, they are best placed to influence and shape the engagement plans.

Record every scrap of information from every contact made by **anyone** relating to a potential opportunity. This could be from casual contacts through to formal meetings. Any intelligence gathered will be valuable within the engagement planning.

Allocate, or be prepared to use funds to develop early engagement

Engaging with customers early will always involve allocation of resources. Of course, this will not only include time, but also money.

Most organisations will allocate a budget for an opportunity. Convention and anecdotal

evidence suggest that up to 80% of that budget will be expended on pre-proposal development customer engagement. Hence, this activity doesn't come for free! But what it does engender is the notion of **'engage heavy and early and then bid light!'**

This suggests, therefore, that if you spend a greater proportion of time in the process of customer engagement prior to the release of an ITT/RFP, then the proposal development becomes easier to produce, more focussed in content and much more likely to succeed.

Use innovative and interesting ways of keeping your organisation in front of potential customers

I'm often asked, 'How do I keep our organisation in front of potential customers?' In fact, this is one area where you can bring innovation and originality into your thinking.

This fact sheet won't give you the complete solution to this but may give you some ideas of how you could 'think outside the box' to come up with some innovative ways of achieving engagement. Always remember that any positive engagement with your potential customers will reap dividends when responding to an ITT/RFP. Indeed,

Here are some ideas for you to consider:

- **Traditional white papers.** If you are trying to position your organisation as a 'leader in the field', then consider writing some papers, or **white papers** as they're often called, to let your potential customer know about some aspects of your solution. For example, you might have a technical solution, or you're researching some new solution to a known problem in your sector. By producing a series of white papers on the subject, you can let potential customers know you're 'on the case', that you know what the issues are and that you're 'taking a lead'. This can give you instant credibility with a potential customer and help you develop conduits for contact with them,

particularly, if you're working with an independent third party, like an academic institution. In effect, you're positioning yourself as a leader, or influencer, in the field; an organisation that is worthy of doing business with, potentially. Keep the papers simple and consider using the STAR (situation, task, action, result) method of producing them. *

- **Podcasts and Vlogs.** The media might be different, but the white paper production principles can be applied to podcasts and vlogs. Podcasts are brilliant for 'commute to work' situations, where a listener will pick up on a topic e.g. that technical solution you've been developing, or a discussion with other key figures in the field. Vlogs, a video version of the same sort of thing, can also be incredibly valuable as a source of keeping you 'visible' to a potential customer. You can make this even more powerful, if you create a series where key contacts subscribe to listen or watch the next in the series.
- **Blogs.** A weblog, or blog as they're more normally known, can be used in a similar way to the techniques already mentioned. Creating a pithy series of interesting material that you know potential customers might be interested in, will give you credibility and, again, open routes for engagement. Blogs are particularly useful in situations where customers already know about you and return to your website to see what you're up to. Additionally, using your website is useful where you want to cross refer customers to other techniques, such as podcasts, vlogs and downloadable white papers.
- **Public relations (PR).** Never forget the power of a good news story. If your organisation has won an award, taken a lead in some aspect of your sector, or has done something that had a good impact on the environment or the social fabric of an area, get a story into the press or on social media outlets! PR outcomes can have the additional

benefit of being subsequently used as evidence in your proposal development later.

- **Social media strategy.** Using social media posts, particularly on platforms like LinkedIn, are an excellent way of keeping a presence across your own sector. Additionally, posts are a great way to advertise some of the other techniques mentioned here; if you have a podcast series on some aspect of your operation or potential offerings, advertise it on social media. That said, social media use needs a comprehensive strategy and someone responsible for managing it. It cannot be a secondary activity. Always plan social media postings with other engagement activities.
- **Events.** When time permits, various activities (e.g. Open days, workshops, industry positioning events etc.) are an excellent way of raising your organisation's profile, particularly if you have a narrative that you want to put across to a potential customer. These are especially useful where a customer has engaged with you to seek your views on a subject. An event of some description might be used to galvanise thinking about a sector issue, for example. Take care, however, not to turn an event into a hospitality junket! Rightly, potential public sector customers will not attend these, and such events will backfire, having the opposite effect of proactive engagement.

Know what value you can offer a potential customer, so that this can be promoted and tested often

During engagement activity, it is important to highlight any value that you can offer a potential customer. Become acutely aware of what you have offered/achieved in the past by rigorously reviewing previous proposals and resulting contracts to see what value you have given in the past.

Work up some statistics/case studies/outcome data to show evidence of previous successes and try to extract real value that you gave. Then, attempt to extrapolate this 'value' across to current opportunities.

Once you've done this, it will be possible to work up some formal Value Propositions** (VPs), both written and graphical, and test them ...subtly! Your BD team, and anyone who has contact with the customer in formal situations, will be able to introduce value propositions into presentations and conversation, to see how effective they are, and what impact they have.

Once you know that a value proposition works, you will be able to use it in the future proposal. Revisit them regularly to ensure they remain effective for the opportunity.

Use the whole planning time/process to get internal colleagues on side!

Never underestimate the friction that may arise from internal colleagues when developing customer engagement processes! This is particularly so where there is a formal BD team in place and another party is appointed to develop engagement strategy.

The point to get across here is that nobody is attempting to undermine BD activity. Rather, customer engagement strategy if done strategically and collectively, will significantly enhance it. Additionally, such engagement will **always** inform any subsequent response to an ITT/RFP accurately and efficiently. This will always place your organisation in a better position to win; something we all want!

One last tip here is that whoever develops customer engagement, encourage them to give

regular updates to management teams, bid teams and key personnel throughout engagement. Getting everyone on board with the strategy will enhance the planning, improve specific inputs to the strategy and generate tangible and advantageous outcomes.

The last word on early customer engagement!

Don't waste your time if your organisation hasn't engaged with a customer prior to being asked to respond to an RFP/ITT. If you do, you'll probably fail and fail badly. Some form of prior customer engagement early in the process **must** be the norm, if you want to create winning proposals!

There are some excellent hints and tips on customer engagement processes and principles in *The Shipley Capture Guide*, available [here](#) and *Writing Business Bids and Proposals for Dummies* available [here](#).

If you are interested in taking your professional life further in the world of bids and proposals, then I suggest you consider joining the **Association of Bid & Proposal Writing Professionals (APMP)**. Further details of membership and professional development can be seen at their UK website [here](#) and at their USA website [here](#).

Good luck and, as always, keep bidding!

*The STAR approach can also be used in the development of case studies. Listen to Episode 1 of this podcast series, '**Six ways to reach bid Nirvana in quiet periods!**' for more information.

**We'll be looking at VPs in more detail in later podcasts.