



Question Wizards: The Magic of Asking the Client the RIGHT Questions

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- Steve Skeldon, CF APMP, is a Senior Proposal Manager with Vectrus, with 8+ years of proposal experience across the Federal services industry. He has managed and supported bids for a large variety of customers across civilian and defense sectors of Government, with heavy support of Navy and Army clients. He is heavily involved in APMP at the local and international levels, receiving the distinction of being named a 40 under 40 in 2018 at the APMP International Conference in San Diego, and currently serving as the Conference Co-Chair for the APMP NCA MAC 2019 conference. He holds a B.A. from Roanoke College and an M.P.S from The George Washington University.

Allison Powell



- Allison Powell has over a decade of experience in Government contracting as a contracts manager and proposal manager, editor, and writer. She has managed contracts for a range of customers including NASA, U.S. Navy, FBI, United States Postal Service, and the Department of State. She has managed proposals with a team of over 20 subcontractors and has written and edited cost volumes and management volumes for efforts valued at over \$50 million. She holds a B.A. from Villanova University and an M.A. from American University.

Kevin Switaj



- Kevin Switaj, PhD CF APMP is President and CEO of BZ Opportunity Management, a consulting firm providing high-quality bid management, process optimization, contracts, and training support. He possesses over a decade of experience in proposal management and leadership. As a proposal manager and executive, he has supported and trained a wide range of Government contractors. A multiple award winning writer in the field, he has presented at numerous APMP regional and international conferences, including SPAC in 2017 and 2018. He has degrees from Rutgers University (BA), Villanova University (MA), and Indiana University (PhD).

Alexandra Cuccaro



- Alexandra Cuccaro is an experienced pricing professional with over 11 years of experience within the Federal Acquisition industry. She currently serves as a Price-to-Win Analyst for Richter & Company, providing clients with a detailed understanding of their customer's needs and the capabilities and prices their competitors will offer. Prior to joining Richter & Company, Ms. Cuccaro was the Director of Pricing for Sabre Systems Inc., and a Lead Pricing Analyst for Exelis Corporation, and Phacil, Inc. She's led the development of hundreds of Cost/Price Volumes, offering strong analytical and problem-solving skills to deliver pricing strategies and ensuring compliant proposal responses. Ms. Cuccaro received a B.S. degree in Accounting from George Mason University. She has also completed a variety of professional training programs, including being APMP Foundation Level Certified.



The Magic of Asking Questions

- **What is the purpose of the Question and Answer phase?**
 - Clarify the customer's intent and expectations
 - Correct any inconsistencies within the RFP
 - *The better your understanding – the better your proposal will be!*
- Successful bidders know how to get as much information as possible through thoughtful questions – and on the flip-slide, when to remain silent
- The way you ask a question could promote an unfavorable response or reveal part of your strategy to your competitors
- The customer is only human – they can subconsciously develop a bias (good or bad)
 - They spent months working on the requirements – don't call their baby ugly
 - Represent your company in a professional manner – you will be taken more seriously
- Q&A's could be the first introduction of your company to the customer
 - **FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE IMPORTANT!**
- Don't ask a question you don't want the answer to
 - Always consider what the consequences are if they answer the question against you
 - Examples of when to remain silent as part of your strategy (i.e. font requirements, number of required personnel...)

The Magic of Asking Questions

- We want to ask the customer questions that
 - **Are beneficial to both parties**
 - **Don't weaken the customer's position or mission**
 - **Try not to ask the customer to do your capture work for you**
 - **Sometimes, especially in commercial work, this is unavoidable**
 - **Aren't already answered in the solicitation documents**
 - **Asking a question that is clearly answered within the solicitation documents can send a message that this is not a priority for your company or that you lack a general understanding**
 - **Don't ask the customer if they're biased towards a competitor**



The Magic of Asking Questions

- How do we do this?
 - **Drive the customer to answer in our favor, simply.**
 - You can ask “Will the customer confirm their intention in clause X is A or B?”
 - If it is beneficial to your organization to have their intention be “A” then just ask them to say that.
 - This makes them write a longer answer and potentially consider alternatives that your organization may not be aware of/prepared for.
 - You should ask “Please confirm that the customer intends clause X to be ‘A’.”
 - Drive to “Yes”
 - Customers are staffed with human beings, don’t make their job harder
 - **Be specific – not long-winded**
 - The customer has hundreds if not thousands of questions to read and answer from industry, it should be your goal to get them to say yes to your question
 - **Don’t be afraid of your copy editor**
 - Even a basic edit can catch potentially embarrassing mistakes
 - **Develop a template to capture your teams questions that includes RFP section, page number, and exact paragraph you are inquiring about**
 - This will drive your team to consistency and completeness in developing questions

When Questions Go Wrong

Question	Answer	Why?
How many cleaning-related service calls have been performance in the past year? (e.g., spill clean up)	Custodial Services are not a requirement of this contract. Please review the specifications and attachments in their entirety.	Asking the customer a question unrelated to the procurement/not reading the documents
Which of the 175 positions are staffed by incumbents provided by my company?	You may contact your company's IT project manager/s for more information regarding your company's resources.	Asking the customer a question about your own organization
Please change "at the discretion of Govt." to "based on discussion and agreement between Contractor and Govt."	Thank you for your input.	Asking the customer to reduce their bargaining position
Please provide a technical description of the WHITE CHAIRS required for a Type II Special Event.	The white folding chairs	Asking the customer a question with a readily apparent answer
What three things that the customer must have that they did not get from current contractor?	The Government expects the terms of the PWS to be met.	This offeror clearly did not take the time to meet or understand their customer on the most basic level and is trying to make up for that in the RFP phase

How to Ask Correctly

Poorly Worded	Well Worded	Why?
Can an extension in the due date be given?	Due Date/Time - Based on the complexity of this RFP and the tactical response requirements, would the Government please extend the due date by a minimum of two weeks?	Providing a rationale to your question and driving the customer to “Yes” should be the goal. By explaining WHY you need an extension, you’re more likely to receive one.
We request for an acronym list to be allowed and excluded from page count in all volumes.	In order to allow a comprehensive acronym list to aid customer evaluation, can the Acronym List be allowed and excluded from page count?	Asking to change requirements in order to make the customer’s job easier in evaluation is a quick way to drive them to say Yes.
Can offerors alter the provided Past Performance template?	Since not all Past Performance References cover all required areas, it is acceptable to the Government that we either eliminate, strike through, or gray out the areas we do not intend for the respondent to complete to help expedite their ability to complete and return the PPQ document in a more timely manner?	Provides very direct, clear rationale on what and why you want to change, and allows the customer to easily say yes when they understand it will not impact, and will probably ease, their evaluation.



Conclusion

- Now that you know the magic of asking questions, do you have any for the panel?

