



## The power of the cover letter

Enhance your credibility by producing a powerful, yet succinct, message.

Marketing teams in the A/E/P and environmental consulting industry put considerable emphasis on the internal content and graphic layout of their proposal packages. Marketers and the diligent efforts of their teams aim for the shortlist by producing quality and outstanding proposal packages as a necessary measure to convey the design sense and thoroughness of their firms. True—this will allow a firm to stand out as the reader weeds out submissions, one by one, in the tiresome stack. Here's a not-so-well-known secret: the *cover letter* can be the most impressive element of a proposal. This article explains a successful tool for creating cover letters and some best-practices tips on how to develop content to best respond to an RFP. As the first opportunity to reach out, connect, and grab the reader, the one- to two-page cover letter can positively excite the client about the content that they will review in the pages ahead. Yet, although they know the importance of the cover letter, marketers industry-wide still tend to include static, repetitious, and off-topic content that invariably overlooks the needs of the client. These cover letters, void of thought and concept, can easily get a proposal package set aside. Well-developed and convincing cover letters that speak specifically to a client's values and reveal the credible strengths of a firm will promptly move a submission to the "shortlist" group.

A Washington, D.C.-based architecture firm with a broad range of government and private clients developed a tool to help create well-conceived cover letters regardless of client or project type. Upon researching the structure and content of effective cover letters from across all industries, the marketing team developed a template addressing the entire range of the firm's portfolio, existing clients, potential client relationships, and specialized expertise. Like any cover letter, the structure of this template has an introduction, body, and

ending. However, within the body section, the template includes smaller segments that can be removed and substituted to support the contents of the proposal that follow. These segments highlight the firm's robust project portfolio by addressing each project type—new construction, design/build, renovation, modernization, master planning, etc., as well as specialized services and diverse client relationships. The marketing team can insert tailored and specific qualitative and quantitative facts, unlike general boilerplate information. By consolidating the cover letter content for the range of project types, specialized services, client relationships, and quantitative project data, the use of this tool has reduced production time by 40%.

Shaping an effective cover letter requires acute research. Analyzing the goals and values of the prospective organization will prove to be a fundamental asset. Incorporating this research should establish a tone for the cover letter that aligns with the client's vision. As in business, people find comfort in fostering existing relationships and building trust with organizations of familiarity. Selection committees tend to select firms that delivered well on past projects. Identifying and including a firm's relationship or past experiences with the prospective organization is vital to staying on top with a selection committee. Firms that lack experience with a potential client can speak to the strengths of their portfolios and specialized expertise with the particular project type—even with other notable clients. For example, firms submitting a package to PepsiCo for a regional distribution center without experience with Pepsi should mention other distribution centers designed/constructed for Wal-Mart in their portfolio. Relating relevant past experience of a firm allows for stronger competitive differentiation that will distinguish the proposal from others in the stack. Recognizing a firm's strengths can be especially valuable to cover letters, particularly if the project presents distinctive or potentially challenging aspects, including urban site security, preservation of monumental historic

buildings, or experience in the design of containerized housing units.

Well-conceived cover letters quantify the strengths of a firm. Statistics about specific projects, a firm's portfolio, and the team shape a convincing rationale in the reader's eyes. Examples of this can include the amount of square feet of space designed for education facilities, number of housing units designed in mixed-use development, number of years of experience of the entire project team, or number of years of experience working with the client. Firms with experience working abroad and with international clients should mention the number of offices and similar projects worldwide and even the language proficiency of the team. International clients find this global reach desirable; it can also provide opportunities for additional work in the future for similar projects.

Marketing expert Marilynn Mendell, president of WinSpin CIC, notes that a successful cover letter must convey a sincere and genuine pitch expressing why a firm wants the project. An earnest request that speaks from the heart will be memorable to the reader. This humility can also be expressed by thanking the committee for their time and consideration, which will distinguish the proposal package from competitors and other proposals that the selection committee must review.

Proofread carefully—spelling and grammatical mistakes in cover letters taint the credibility of a proposal (and firm) and will limit the submission from advancing to the "shortlist" group. Thoughtful and well-developed cover letters, free of error, will make a proposal stand out among the other submission packages and could be the determining factor for shortlist selections.

Cover letters should be a powerful and succinct document that provides the committee with a desire to read the entire proposal package. The impact of this first impression will ultimately make or break an opportunity. ▀▄

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