

Tender Tip – Win Strategies

Here are some tips and hints about winning strategies, value propositions and win themes by leading USA author and practitioner of business proposals Tom Sant, extracted from his book “*Persuasive Business Proposals*” (AMACON, 2004).

Differentiate Yourself in Ways that Matter:

To create a solid value strategy, base your value proposition on your own strengths or differentiators. What is it that you do that no one else in your industry does? What is there that everyone does, but you do in a way that is clearly different? Sustainable, meaningful differentiation does not usually arise from operational advantages or product features. Rather, it’s more likely to come from systems, processes, or methods of working. A differentiator that doesn’t benefit the customer isn’t worth mentioning.

Varieties of Value: Understanding What Matters to the Client:

Operational costs. Profits. Gross or net revenues. Transaction value. Salaries. Benefits. These are all types of value that are likely to be measured in financial terms.

But some clients are looking for other kinds of improvements. Don’t restrict yourself to financial measures unless the client has indicated to you that nothing else matters. Here are some to think about, but this is by no means an exhaustive list, either:

- **Financial:** getting the lowest price, receiving the greatest total value when services and add-ons are included, achieving the lowest total cost of ownership, reducing or eliminating operating expenses, increasing revenue, improving cash flow, reducing bad debt, increasing the average dollar value of each transaction, getting a larger portion of each customer’s total business.
- **Social:** internal – increasing employee job satisfaction, enhancing job performance, reducing turnover among staff members, reducing absenteeism, accelerating employee training, outsourcing to remove fixed costs from the payroll; external – increasing customer loyalty, improving brand recognition, creating a positive image in the community, addressing a societal concern.
- **Quality:** improving reliability, enhancing maintainability, increasing ease of use, complying with regulatory standards, conforming to a specific quality methodology, reducing defect rates, reducing customer complaints.
- **Technology/Infrastructure:** achieving greater interoperability, improving system flexibility, implementing the most advanced technology, preserving the value of legacy systems, creating the most open solution, reducing downtime, adding new features or capabilities, automating a labour-intensive process.
- **Risk minimization:** avoiding the risk of failure, implementing the safest, most proven approach, addressing health and safety issues, avoiding liability concerns, using a conservative approach to solve a critical business need.
- **Industry trends:** keeping up with competition, entering new markets quickly, updating products and services to keep them competitive, changing delivery platforms, eliminating fixed costs, focusing on core business competencies.
- **Competitive advantage:** achieving the best total improvement in operational and financial performance, leaping past a competitor’s position, dominating a market.

Your goal is to figure out which variety of value is most important or most appealing to your decision maker, then use it to frame your strategy for the entire proposal.

In framing your value proposition, you can take either a positive or a negative approach. Positive strategies are based on **gain**. Your goal is to persuade the client that what you are recommending offers him or her the greatest amount of gain of all the available options. Negative strategies are based on **fear** or **avoidance**. In that case, your goal is to alert the client to the problems (even disasters) that are possible unless certain measures are taken. Either approach works and both approaches are ethical, as long as they are based on the honest assessment of the client's situation.

Proving Your Value with Win Themes:

Your strategy is your overall approach to the issue of value. It's the broad message of value that you'd like each person who evaluates your proposal to walk away with. A **win theme** is a specific, tactical message that supports your overall strategy. Win themes provide you with an opportunity for substantiation and specificity. Win themes can provide cohesion to a proposal, unifying the message and lifting it from merely providing information in response to a request to a persuasive presentation of a business case.

A proposal should have one strategy. It doesn't have to be perfect, but if you've done your homework to uncover the customer's needs and values, it'll be effective. That strategy can then be supported and substantiated by several win themes. I would recommend selecting only two or three win themes to make the process easier to manage and to keep your proposal focused.

In developing win themes, you will want to identify which value strategies a particular theme can support, which differentiators link to it, and what evidence or substantiation you can marshal to prove it. Evidence might include:

- Case studies
- References
- Testimonials
- Third-party endorsements
- Partnerships
- Statistics and facts about your organisation
- Tools
- Methodologies
- Patents
- Contracts
- Publications
- Unique expertise among your employees

Evidence becomes meaningful when it is clearly aligned to a specific theme. Otherwise, it runs the risk of just being background noise.

Final Thoughts on Value:

Winning becomes a matter of chance if you don't show compelling value. Take the time to develop a clear value proposition for your proposals. In addition, try to develop reusable content and standard value messages that you can use when you create proposals for your most common products and services.

It will also help you and your colleagues compete more successfully if you develop standard approaches to quantifying impact. These may be ROI models or formulas to generate a payback analysis. The goal is to create something appropriate to your client base and markets. If you can provide your decision makers with a benchmark against which they can do their own calculations of probable return, you will have successfully shifted their attention away from price and onto value. That's a much better place to be.