Authors and Contributors…

The link between good ideas and the proposal document

by Roger Dean

Author's note: I first wrote this article in February 1996, almost 16 years ago. I've learned a lot about my craft in the ensuing years and some of my thoughts about proposals have changed rather than simply matured. This isn't one of those changes. Every company I help and that insists it knows better about who should actually write their proposal text comes away from the proposal wondering why getting from "we are going to bid" to "thank heavens that's over with" was so painful.

Authors and contributors have straightforward responsibilities to the proposal process: together they "own" the details of the program solution and create the proposal text and artwork that reflect it. Just as volume captains are responsible for the program solution at the volume level, authors and contributors are responsible for the details of the solution at the proposal paragraph level. If you're an author or contributor, you have *direct, hands-on responsibility* for program details and proposal text. Authors and contributors do things themselves, they don't manage others. Conversely, if you're part of the proposal management team, you shouldn't be writing a word of the proposal. At least not for the early drafts. If you're a manager, your job is to guide and review proposal development, not do it yourself.

So how do you know if you should be an author or contributor? The distinction is driven by both the time the individual spends working the proposal as well as their technical skills, contributions to developing the program solution, and writing skills.

- *Authors* are essentially full-time proposal participants and play a major role in shaping both the program, the sell, and the proposal document. In addition to developing program details from the guidance provided by any early strategy work, authors actually **write the proposal storyboards** (including developing or selecting draft artwork) and **write the draft proposal sections**. They do these things themselves; they do not dole the jobs out to others. In a sense, authors can be considered as *requirements managers* who have ultimate responsibility for making certain their portions of the proposal respond to (and, ideally, are compliant with) customer requirements.

- *Contributors*, are technical specialists who may be needed to interpret, resolve, or satisfy specific design requirements. They are the functional experts who "own" the details of a specific solution but aren't needed to write about it… at least not for material that will be directly included in the proposal document. While contributors may have been tasked with developing white papers or running tests or experiments to provide proposal date, they usually have no direct *proposal* writing responsibility other than to *help* prepare storyboards, review draft text for technical accuracy and completeness, and develop cost estimates.

There are often lots of reasons why you might be right for one job or the other. Let's look at the credentials a suitable author must possess. In part, the characteristics of a good author are similar to those of a good volume manager: Four criteria should be at the top of the list:

- ***Availability***: Since authors have such a major responsibility to the proposal, their role is one of full-time or nearly so. Even the best candidate is unsuitable as an author is he or she is not available to do what is required.

- ***Domain expertise***: Again considering the scope of responsibility to the overall pursuit, people chosen as authors need to have sufficient technical understanding of their subject to be able to collect and organize appropriate data, and develop a cogent and persuasive argument around those data.

- ***Data collection skills***: All but the most skilled authors will have to rely on other sources (including contributors) for much of the information for his proposal section. A good author must know how to collect, organize, summarize, and interpret information from a variety of sources. Some of these include the Competition Data Base, earlier proposal materials such as strategies, interviews with contributors, and "common knowledge."

- ***Writing skills***: Authors are the folks who prepare the storyboards and the proposal text. They make the initial decisions about what graphics go into the proposal and how they support the overall argument. People who are expected to write should have at some skill in the craft.

Another way of determining who should be an author is to come at it from the other direction… decide who should be a contributor. People who are ideal contributors are often totally unsuitable as authors. 1) Your candidate may have other obligations or responsibilities that prevent him from giving the time necessary to be an author. 2) He may be the kind of "company genius" who knows a lot but can't get it down on paper… either because he can't write well at all, or because he can only write the 50-page version when you will want the 2-page synopsis. Neither of these conditions make someone unsuitable for a proposal, but in either case, though, your candidate is a contributor not an author.

"Writing" is hard work that takes time, even for skilled writers. ("Easy reading is damned hard writing." Nathaniel Hawthorne) In general, target each *author* for about 10-30 pages of finished proposal text, including artwork. This is the best compromise between every expert writing their own section (the best solution from a technical perspective) and one person writing the entire proposal document (the best solution from a selling perspective). What this means, again, is that one person actually *writes* that many pages, either from storyboards and/or from contributor inputs. Yes, this will usually mean that one person has to write about things that may be slightly outside of his or her specialty, but that is why you have contributors.

Failing to differentiate between authors and contributors can bring a proposal to its knees at the worst possible time, when you are transforming the first rough draft (when you will be reminded about why some people cannot be authors) into a second draft that can be called a "proposal." But by understanding what authors and contributors actually do, having the right quantity of both, and making the right decisions about who should fill each role and when, you will help control your proposal budget. And equally important, you will improve the quality of your proposal documents while at the same time reducing the toll that most proposals levy on the people who prepare them.