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FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH*

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IN PURSUIT OF INSIGHT:
Thoughts about Rapport

**MILLENNIALS
PUZZLE & DELIGHT**
QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS

**TIPS FOR OBSERVING
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH** *from*
QRCA's Professionalism Committee

Working with
**COLLABORATIVE
SOFTWARE**



A PROPOSAL BY ANY OTHER NAME

Would Still Be a Proposal

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Research design is inarguably the most important aspect of a proposal. That design is what often sets you apart from your competition and establishes your value. It is likely to be one of the top two criteria the buyer will use in awarding the project.

Whether we think of ourselves as “consultants” or “research suppliers” impacts how we evaluate and write proposals. QRCs prefer to think of themselves as consultants, but historically they have written proposals as research vendors. Consultants are professionals, deserving respect; research vendors are commodities, competing against others for the projects that come their way. Challenge your clients to give you the respect and consideration afforded to professional consultants — up your game when creating your proposal.

The benefits of creating a proposal are mutual. The most obvious for the client is the ability to shop around, whether for the best price or most appropriate study design or to find the consultant with the greatest experience and broadest knowledge base to best solve the research issues. For the QRC, the benefits can include obtaining the attention of a prospective client who may not be receptive to receiving a brochure or email, having the opportunity to establish credibility, showcasing his or her creativity in study design and/or having a “quick-start guide” to begin the project once awarded.

Research design is inarguably the most important aspect of a proposal. That design is what often sets you apart from your competition and establishes your value. It is likely to be one of the top two criteria the buyer will use in awarding the project. However, it can be time consuming and bothersome when there may be no reasonable expectation that you will get the project. Even though QRCs benefit from writing proposals, they can often find themselves creating something valuable for the prospect without receiving either the project or compensation for their intellectual property (i.e., study design).

Giving It Away or Charging

Individual QRCs have been reluctant to consider charging for proposals because “we’ve never done that before” and because the whole idea strikes a chord of fear in researchers, especially during tough economic times.

“Folks in our niche do not charge for proposals. We do spend a lot of time and energy in getting them out, but the prospect or client is conditioned to receiving them at no charge. That is the price of getting business. In this economy, I think one would be crazy to expect a prospective client to pay for a proposal.”

— Michael Silverman, formerly with Carbon View Research

While the majority of the researchers I spoke with thought the idea of charging for proposals was preposterous, it is not unreasonable. Consultants in industries other than research just assume that the first phase of a project will include collecting the information necessary to write a “good/valuable” proposal. To them, and to a growing group of QRCs, a proposal is your intellectual property, which provides

the client with an actionable, valuable plan; therefore, it is worth compensation.

“When you charge, you are taken more seriously; the client senses that you run a quality organization, that you provide a better caliber of work and that a well-educated, experienced person is writing the proposal, not a junior to whom it was passed off.”

— Suzanne Marks, founder of Pasadena Advertising

“I have some strong opinions about research industry pros starting to charge for complicated proposals. I believe we need to band together as a profession to stop the commoditization of our business. ...RFPs with multiple bidders are just free-for-alls... and I won't jump into a free for all — it's just uncompensated work for me. ...I call it vendor abuse. I didn't start this business to be treated like that. ...Giving away our skill and talents without charging cheapens the whole industry.”

— Debbie Howard, QRC, president of Japan Market Resource Network

When an Estimate Will Do

QRCs need to differentiate between a cost estimate and proposal, deciding when each is appropriate and when to ask to be paid for the thinking and direction that goes into producing a proposal document. Most QRCs would agree that there is no need to charge for a one- to two-page cost estimate containing a basic recap of the objectives, a short description of the methodology, costs and timing.

Yet, there is a fine line between wanting to demonstrate your value by going into great detail about how you would do the project and not providing enough information to show that you do know what you are doing when it comes to the methodology you recommend. You can provide a bare-bones outline and not charge for this type of proposal, or you can provide enough information to demonstrate that you understand the client's business and issues, have a specific research approach to recommend and have thought through the issues sufficiently to signify your worth and ability, enough so to charge for the proposal.

“I will submit a proposal, at no cost to the prospective client, but it will identify the prospect's issues and illustrate my ability to solve those issues... not tell how I am going to do it.”

— Rob Frankel, marketing consultant and author

One consultant explained that she will give prospective clients elements of her process at no charge, but not all of it. “There is intellectual property in writing proposals... If I am asked, I might give them one idea, but I won't do any more without being paid for it,” says Jennifer Shaheen, The Technology Therapist. When her client is unambiguous about what he or she needs and can

articulate it clearly to her, Ms. Shaheen provides a brief proposal or expanded estimate at no cost.

“I do not charge for proposals. However, I follow a practice (and teach it as well) in which I will agree to submit a written proposal only after I have been told what needs to be included for it to be accepted. The only real downside (which is actually more of an upside) comes when the prospect refuses this approach because he or she is used to getting new ideas and free research from proposals that are submitted in the traditional way.”

— Ike Krieger, Krieger (Sales) Training

When a Fee is Appropriate

Like other consultants, QRCs should consider charging for proposals when more time and effort is required, whether this is consulting up front to help the client organize his or her thoughts for the project, identifying process efficiencies or providing specialty knowledge and expertise. The following may guide you in your evaluation of whether or not to charge for your proposal:

- When the client may be unable to provide enough background information to allow the QRC to do a quick, targeted bid (either the client contact knows little about research or is not sufficiently involved in the project to provide accurate direction). In some cases, you may even need to find secondary research to support your proposal. In such cases, the QRC's proposal becomes an educational tool for the prospective client and is worthy of compensation.
- When the client perceives only one problem or area in which he/she needs research, but the QRC sees that the project should address a series of needs and/or that a series of projects is needed to deliver meaningful/actionable data. In these cases, your experience and expertise hold value above and beyond scoping out the project on paper for them.
- When the client needs direction on what methodology will best meet the goals or objectives of the research. Each method that the QRC recommends will have different benefits and costs attached to them. In these cases, outlining and describing the multiple options, and the pros and cons of each, can help the client choose the best path for his/her company — whether this be cost implications, schedule restrictions, travel considerations, etc.
- When a potential client requests a partnership with the QRC (e.g., you are the third-party vendor). Often accompanying this type of situation, the client (e.g., research supplier ad agency, marketing consultant, etc.) will request extensive background research, study design detailing or possibly a line-item cost estimate. Be cautious. You will likely perform a great amount of work

preparing a proposal in which your intellectual property is being presented as someone else's work. In addition, you have no way of knowing if the design will be presented as you intended. If you are doing someone else's job, you deserve to be paid for it.

Another twist on this situation is when several different full-service research companies or consultants in other arenas contact you around the same time with identical or similar project descriptions. This may be a bidding war for which the project will just go to the lowest bidder. Being at arm's length from the end client always puts you at a disadvantage.

- When you want to be taken more seriously and be seen as a professional. QRCs are often solo practitioners who lose out to big-name brand-research companies. Charging for a proposal demonstrates that you take yourself seriously and are capable of competing effectively against any size company.

"To avoid the tire kickers, I put on the document that it is a preliminary bid. It contains a general amount — no breakdowns, just broad categories — and I charge \$500, which will be applied when you sign a contract. I am an expert at what I am doing and should be compensated for what I do. People are willing to pay because we are good. Only the people who are good deserve to be compensated, and if they are good, they should ask for it."

— Lawrence Young, L2 Construction Consortium Inc.

A Proposal by Any Other Name

Generally, consultants in other industries who charge for proposals call them something else to reflect the time, effort and value involved in producing the document. For them, creating the proposal is actually the first phase of the project. Terms used for the "proposal phase" of a project differ by industry and include "assessment," "scoping phase," "business plan," "detailed plan," "discovery phase," "Phase 1" (of a multi-phase project), etc.

Although some other industries do provide free proposals comparable to what QRCs provide, I have been told that no public relations firm would deliver a proposal (i.e., plan) without expecting to be paid.

"I do not submit detailed proposals prior to receiving an engagement letter (i.e., contract). I am perfectly willing to tell a prospective client what I would plan to accomplish — but not how. What I will do is gather information about the client's situation, and I will present my analysis of the needs and the outcomes I would hope to achieve, with some general comments about how

It is really a mindset issue. How do we think about ourselves... as craftsmen and professionals, or as tradesmen/order takers/suppliers/vendors?

I would hope to achieve those outcomes. I then say that the first step in the engagement would be the development, in consultation with the client, of a detailed plan. In other words, I make it clear that the plan gets done on their dime, not mine."

— Alex Auerbach, Alexander Auerbach & Co., PR

Simplify and Speed Up Proposal Writing

Wouldn't it be nice if we always had the luxury of time to work together with a prospective client to review all the issues and gather data about the industry and company — and then write a detailed proposal? This time can be invaluable in building a great research design as well as the start of building a closer relationship with the client. When there is no time to gather the in-depth information, pre-screening the prospective client will help you learn what you need to create a winning proposal. This also includes pre-qualifying the client to ensure that he or she is serious regarding his request for proposal. (Holly M. O'Neill's article entitled "Using Your Qualitative Skills to Drive Great Proposals!" in the Fall 2006 issue of *QRCA VIEWS* offers ways to accomplish these efficiently and write a more targeted proposal.)

One common piece of advice from those I interviewed for this study included keeping it "short and sweet," certainly no more than five pages. Clients do not have time to read through a long, laborious proposal. Make your point; do not belabor it.

"The individual or group selecting the consultant wants to know that the consultant can get the job done better, cheaper and faster than the competition — in as few words and pages as possible. A clear AND concise presentation is absolutely necessary to establish credibility. And do not forget that minimalism is 'green,' and in many organizations, it is appreciated as much as — or more than — a glossy proposal that has lots of fluff."

— Bruce Bisikin, specialist in Assessment and Counseling at Delaware Valley Career Solutions, LLC

I would never advise using broiler-plate proposals; however, you can create a template for some parts of your proposal. Sections you will likely include with a proposal often will contain the same basic information each time but can be modified to address the client's specific industry or

company needs. One example might be statistics or demographic information pertaining to a segment for which you have a specialty, like teens or Hispanics in the U.S. These types of items, and certainly others, can be prepared for use over and over again in your proposals.

Finally, if the proposal is really on target and convincing, you do not need to put in a lot of information about yourself and your background. If possible, integrate information about you and your company into the proposal in a way that shows how your background, capabilities, experience with clients with problems similar to their own, etc., establish your credibility and value to the client.

Talking about Money

Do not talk about money until well into the conversation — after the client is comfortable with you and sees the value in your research approach.

There is no good reason not to raise the issue of a proposal fee during the client screening process, and this is where the pre-qualifying task can assist you. Probe gently about the budget available for the project and, if there is no budget, what would be a comfortable range for the prospect. Yes, QRCs can ask if the client has a tentative budget. Finding out the budget can help direct your choice of study design, targets, locations, etc., and result in a more suitable proposal.

If the prospect has no understanding of research costs and/or no intention of spending what it would cost to implement what you are considering proposing, politely communicate that as much as you would like to help them, your experience makes you believe that what they want to spend is not reasonable. Therefore, you will either not be bidding on the project or will charge a fee for the proposal that will provide them with a greater understanding of the research issues and options.

At this point, it is absolutely necessary for you to explain why the fee is incurred. Make clear what will be included in a valuable, detailed proposal, as opposed to a free cost estimate. Getting client buy-in in advance makes it easier to collect your fee. Ms. Shaheen uses the strategy of telling the client up front that she will produce “a scoping document” that will articulate exactly what she would provide to solve the problem. “To get the client to pay for the proposal/scoping document, I get them to agree that they are not clear about what they want or about the various options available to them,” she explains. “Then they are paying for the education.”

Once you believe you are providing value with the proposal, and you have earned compensation for your intellectual property, there are a few ways to handle getting paid.


Most consultants request payment up front before starting to design the project, and certainly before delivering the proposal, to ensure payment. This way, the prospect compensates you for the time you put into preparing the proposal. If you do not get the project, you will have negotiated with the client beforehand and are compensated for your proposal.

Some will apply the proposal fee received to the final invoice, subtracting this fee from the total project when they get the project. Presenting your fee in this manner is likely the most palatable for the prospect.

Others will divide the project into phases, requesting payment for the proposal at the beginning as payment for the first phase. A proposal coach interviewed for this article explained that QRC skills consist of three distinct services. It is possible to sell each to the client separately or as a package. He described the three services as (1) research design phase — proposal, methodology, sample size and definition, scope of work, cost and timing; (2) implementation phase — data gathering, data processing and data summary; and (3) interpretation phase — data analysis, conclusions and recommendations. The latter is where we really prove our value to the client.

In Summary

QRCs can charge for proposals when demonstrating added value to the client beyond what is offered in a free cost estimate. Reduce the time and effort put into proposals by ferreting out and targeting the key benefits that will get you the project, by proving your worth to the client as succinctly as possible and by not providing so much detail that you are giving away intellectual property. However, doing a proposal at no charge is also sometimes appropriate. The choice is yours.

It is really a mindset issue. How we think about ourselves (as craftsmen and professionals or as tradesmen/order takers/suppliers/vendors) and how we think of what we provide our clients — finite service in return for payment or value that goes beyond what the client is paying — has much to do with whether or not we can charge for what we call proposals. 

Ms. Zwillingler would like to thank the more than 40 people she interviewed prior to writing this article, some of whom are quoted. The majority of these individuals were consultants from a variety of industries, including marketing research, research buyers and qualitative specialists. Those interviews were the basis for the roundtable called “Do’s and Don’t’s for QRCs Writing Proposals” that was presented at the 2008 QRCA Annual Conference.