

PERFECT PROPOSALS

How much better than your competition do you have to be to win twice as much business as them? 25%, 15%, 10% ? You'll probably be surprised at how small the margin has to be to consistently win business from your competition. If you watch sport, how often do you hear phrases like, "By a nose", "Photo Finish", "Hit the Cross bar" or "Just on the Line"? It's the same in business; the winning margins are often tiny and it's an accumulation of even smaller factors that make this difference.

Let's look at a specific, critical example of how to develop that winning edge in a sale. You find a potential customer, qualify that he needs, wants and can afford your offer then present your offer to him, usually through a personal presentation. You'll have gone through these thoroughly and professionally, spending time and money in all the stages. Then comes the close.

Closing is the easiest, most straightforward stage in the sales process if you did all the other stages right, but the most difficult part if you were less than perfect before. The first step in closing is usually a proposal outlining your offer with all its features, advantages and benefits clearly stated and well laid out, with some quality colour graphics and diagrams. This is the foundation on which your success or failure is based and should be a perfect summary of everything that has gone before. The customer will make his buying decision based on your proposal and how it compares with your competition. The main criteria will be the content, including price, delivery, value for money, ROI, etc, but your customer will also look at the physical quality of the document in front of him: paper, cover, colour, graphics, binding, etc. This could be the first impression a customer has of your company and offer if it is given to someone in the organisation you have not already met. If all else is equal between you and your competition, your customer is very likely to base his decision on the most professionally-bound document in front of him. By putting a lot of care and effort into producing the highest-quality document possible, you are demonstrating to your customer that you care about him and want his business.

Your proposal should be as short as possible while making all the necessary points, otherwise the customer will be bored and won't read beyond the first few pages. You can attach supplementary information and refer to it, but not as part of the main proposal, which should be an "executive summary" of features, advantages, benefits, price, timescales and any assumptions you made in producing these. You should start and end the proposal with a short, concise and punchy paragraph summarising your offer: tell them what you're going to say, say it then summarise what you said! The brain remembers the first and last part of anything, so the beginning and end of your proposal, are the parts that really count. Remember, your customer may have to present your proposal to his senior management or board, so the shorter the better.

The most common way of delivering a proposal is e-mail, which has the advantage of reaching your customer in the fastest possible time, but will it win you the order? E-mail takes away all control of how your proposal looks and hands it to your customer. Your beautifully-designed colour graphics could be printed in black and white. The printer's toner could be low, making the document hard to read. The page-breaks might come out in the wrong places. Some pages might not print. The document could be printed on flimsy, low-quality paper and stapled together. You put a large amount of time and effort into qualifying, presenting then producing your proposal so it is essential

that all this is reflected in the final document your customer will use to make his buying decision. You have to design, print and bind the proposal yourself in the most professional way possible and not leave this critical part of the sales process to chance.

You could ask a local printer to produce the proposal for you, but this could be costly and time-consuming if they don't get it right first time. Also, the colour may not be as you want, the layout may not be quite right and, worst of all, at the last minute you might discover a vital change that needs to be made! Printing and binding your own proposal is the only way to ensure the quality you need.

The first impression your proposal will make is in the way it's bound together then in the document cover, and finally in the quality of paper. All this happens before a word of your proposal has been read! Many companies have high-quality covers produced in bulk by an external printer. These can look very good, but have one major flaw: they don't easily allow you to include the customer's name and logo on the front. Doing this really makes your document seriously personal and outstanding. One of the best ways of producing a cover is to use a clear front and high-quality "Leathergrain" back cover, properly bound at the spine. The title can easily be printed on the same paper used in the rest of the proposal and will look really good. The pages should be bright white (avoid coloured paper) and at least 100gsm in weight; Conqueror, or equivalent is best. Use a standard font, such as Ariel, Times New Roman or Garamond and not a funky script type – eye-catching, but difficult to read. Even if you're a graphic designer, model or advertising agency, it's essential that your potential customer is able to assimilate the information in your proposal as easily as possible – make the text clear and add eye-catching graphics, borders, etc to make your artistic points!

There are many ways of binding your proposal, but very few that will make it look really good and professional. Many proposals are bound using plastic covers with various forms of slide that hold the pages together at the spine and many others with ring-binders. Both these methods are cheap and convenient – and it shows! There are variations on these themes, but none of them look good, nor are they particularly easy to hold, manoeuvre or read. Thermal binding gives your documents a quality, bespoke look and comb binding is the most popular, but neither method is as good as Wire Binding, which gives the most professional appearance to your documents by a considerable margin.

Wire binders used to be very expensive, costing several hundred pounds, which put them out of reach of many small businesses. This changed completely when Peach introduced their Personal Wire Binder, making wire binding affordable for any business. A Peach Personal Wire Binder with enough wires and covers to bind 100 proposals will cost less than £70, which is utterly trivial compared to the other costs involved in selling. The finished and bound document looks seriously professional, tailored to the individual customer and clearly states "These guys really want my business and are serious, professional and worthy of my order".

Once your proposal is finished, you can send a copy by e-mail, but put "Draft" as a watermark on all the pages and make it clear that a printed copy will follow very soon. You should also double-check at this point how many people will need a copy. As soon as the correct number of documents are printed and bound, plus two extra just in case, wrap them securely and send them to your customer by a reliable courier. They can be delivered anywhere in the world in two days or less and the

maximum cost will be about £50. Like the cost of a Personal Wire Binder, this is utterly insignificant compared to your other costs.

Your proposal is almost the final stage of a long, sometimes costly and certainly time-consuming process. This is the vehicle you will use in closing the deal and that will take you towards success or failure. It's the only tangible thing in your customer's hands on which to make the sell or reject decision and it must be at least as good as the competition in content and physical quality. You don't usually see your competitors' proposals, so you must make the assumption that theirs' are perfect. You have to "go that extra mile" to show you are serious and really want the business.

In summary:

- Use e-mail only as a precursor to the hard-copy proposal
- Wire bound with high-quality paper and covers
- Customer's name and logo on the front cover – make it personal
- Summary, main body and conclusion – short and to the point, as it may have to go to Senior Managers or Directors
- Supplementary information (data sheets, testimonials, application notes, etc) separate from the main proposal
- Delivery by courier or in person – show you want the business!

For advice on any aspect of the sales process, especially producing the most effective proposals and winning more business, please contact angus@binding-solutions.co.uk.