

Killer Cover Letters

BY ROBERT STEMPIEN, AIA

Submitting a proposal for a “must-win” project will likely begin with a cover letter. The cover letter is the first impression a client may have that highlights your project understanding before they fast forward to the fee section or other key areas of interest. The cover letter is a golden opportunity to put your best foot forward and to capitalize on your pre-sell effort.

After reviewing hundreds of cover letters from A/E/C firms, it is remarkable how similarly they typically begin:

“Thank you for the opportunity to submit our credentials for your XYZ project.”

Or,

“We are excited to submit our...”

This is a boilerplate approach for any project of any size. Does this sound like your cover letters? Claiming you are “excited to submit” may not be sincere and given how often it is used, it probably

won’t differentiate your firm from your competitors. Boilerplate cover letters signal that the person who authored the letter was not engaged in the pre-selling effort and doesn’t understand the client.

The opening sentence in a cover letter can capture the selection committee’s attention and set the tone for the entire written proposal response to follow. One approach is to capitalize on the emotional side of what the client can expect from a successful project outcome. Consider an opening sentence for a new hockey arena that speaks to the essence of the project:

“The puck being dropped at the opening 2011 home game in your new arena is the beginning of many firsts. The first breakout play, the first check, the first goal, and the first chant echoed by the spirited fans who have come together to celebrate a new era for your hockey program.”

Or perhaps this example for a community college science building renovation project, which states what the client plans to achieve:

“The purpose of the science building renovation is to provide the opportunity for students to obtain the skills necessary for today and tomorrow’s employment needs. Our goal, as a Construction Manager, is to partner with your community college to deliver this vision. This proposal details how we will work to achieve project goals.”

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Keep in mind that the focus is on the client. Concentrate on client needs and objectives and the benefit your company will provide. In addition to the opening cover letter dynamics, consider the following rules of thumb when composing a cover letter.

1. Keep the cover letter to one page and highlight only a few key points—try not to fit every differentiator imaginable into the cover letter. Save some thunder for the proposal!

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2. Provide three to five bulleted reasons why your firm is *different* from your competition and how the client will benefit by hiring your company. This could be unique qualifications of personnel, knowledge about end users, sustainable strategies, ideas to address project challenges, or creative bid packaging to engage local firms or save money.
3. Encourage the client to call key references and make it easy for them by including phone numbers and e-mail addresses.
4. List your cell phone number in case the selection committee needs quick information to complete its decision-making process.
5. Provide a believable, strong closing statement.
6. Have the person with whom the client has the strongest relationship/connection sign the cover letter. This might be the president of the company or the proposed site superintendent. The person with the highest position in the company doesn’t necessarily warrant their signature on a cover letter.

Incorporating these cover letter suggestions can promote your company as the firm that listens and the one that is focused on customer objectives. Creating a “killer cover letter” sets the tone for understanding the project, the client, and the unique qualities of your company that differentiate you from the competition. ■

About the Author



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