

Killer Cover Letters for the Win!

by Jen Newman, FSMPS, CPSM

You can't judge a book by its cover, but you can judge a proposal by its cover letter. Don't miss the opportunity to make a first impression or to convey your understanding of the client's needs while highlighting why your firm should be selected.

The opening sentence in a cover letter should capture the decision maker or selection committee's attention and set the tone for the entire written proposal response to follow.

FOCUS AND CUSTOMIZE YOUR COVER LETTER

Every proposal for a must-win project should begin with a cover letter or executive summary. Write your cover letter first so that it guides your teams' writing for the rest of the proposal and to establish a consistent win theme.

The cover letter receives the most focused attention and should balance efficient delivery of key information with a persuasive, well-substantiated pitch to demonstrate a clear understanding of the client's needs.

Many firms make a critical mistake and rely on old standards of "Thank you for the opportunity to submit for your XYZ project" or, "We are excited to submit our..." This approach is old and tired and does nothing to differentiate your firm's expertise or understanding of the project. And, these statements scream BOILERPLATE. Claiming you're "excited to submit" isn't insincere and overused. And, it does nothing to separate your firm from your competitors in a meaningful way.

ABOUT JEN NEWMAN, FSMPS, CPSM



Jen is a 20-year veteran in the AEC industry. With a firm belief that business development is everyone's business and a mantra that growth begins where the comfort zone ends, she drives her clients to create successful business development plans to convert them into rock star doer-sellers, marketers, and business developers who accomplish plan goals. Contact Jen at: jen@elevate-marketingadvisors.com

ABOUT ELEVATE MARKETING ADVISORS

Elevate Marketing Advisors develops marketing and business development campaigns to invigorate your brand, differentiate your firm, and drive business to your bottom line so you stay focused on design and delivery of your discipline.

We are driven to help people and firms realize their beyond through relationship, advocacy, and an elevated client experience. We do this through a daily commitment to our guiding principles:

- Embrace Authenticity
- Reject Mediocrity
- Invest in Relationships
- Deliver with Intention
- Have Fun and Kick Ass!

Killer Cover Letters For the Win!, continued

The generic use of boilerplate signals that the person who authored the letter was not engaged in the pre-selling effort and doesn't understand the client or the project. The opening sentence in a cover letter should capture the decision maker or selection committee's attention and set the tone for the entire written proposal response to follow. In addition to customizing your approach, capitalize on the emotional side of what the client can expect from a successful project outcome by using their own mission or vision. Opening sentences should capture the reader's interest, set forth your understanding of the project, and establish what your firm will do differently and successfully. Some examples include:

"Your project presents exciting opportunities to engage the community, which is one of your organization's stated key goals."

"Your goal of converting existing space to meet new needs due to COVID-19 aligns with the work of our COVID-19 Task Force Team who have developed solutions to minimize impact of modifications to your bottom line."

"The purpose of the Veterans Cemetery is to honor veterans and their families with final resting places in national shrines and commemorate their service and sacrifice to our nation. Our goal, as the civil engineer and landscape architect, is to partner with you to deliver this vision. This proposal details how we will achieve your project goals."

"Rochester University is losing potential revenue due to lack of student housing. Our team will demonstrate how we can deliver your new student housing a full semester early to generate \$1.2M in additional revenue for the University."

KILLER TIPS FOR CREATING KILLER COVER LETTERS

Determine a Win Theme. Win themes ensure the proposal is aligned to the strategy and tactics defined to persuade the decision maker/evaluation team that the proposed solution fits or exceeds the requirements in the RFP. Focus on the unique aspects of the project. Provide three to five bulleted reasons why your firm is different from the competition and how the client will benefit by hiring your firm. Make sure to incorporate your approach in the subject line. For example: *RFP No. NS10003: New County Courthouse to Meet Your March 31 Occupancy Deadline with 10% Reduction in Construction Costs.*

Focus on the Client. Write for the client, not yourself. Don't begin your cover letter with a description of your firm. Write primarily about the client's needs and how you can meet those needs. Focus on the top three critical success factors. Use the client's name more than your own.

Leave Out the Technical. Don't provide unnecessary technical details. The cover letter should be understandable by non-technical people.

Encourage a Reference Check. Encourage the client to call key references; make it easy for them by including phone numbers and e-mail addresses (make sure you ask your references in advance of using their names and let them know every time you use them and for which project).

Remain Concise & Precise. Write simple, short sentences and avoid excessive jargon. Ideally, the cover letter should be one page; preferably no more than two pages.

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Write with an Active Voice. Use strong, enthusiastic, and proactive language ending with a decisive closing statement.

Formatting. Use formatting and graphics to highlight your message. Bullets and headings make the cover letter easier to skim. Well-chosen graphics drive key points home.

Red Team. Have someone not associated with the proposal effort proofread your cover letter to check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation as well as win theme and overall consistency. Ask the Red Team to watch for and call you out on boilerplate.

Make the Ask. Close your cover letter with a direct ask for the project. Provide the project manager's direct line, cell phone, and email. Never send clients to the main number or website to find you – they likely won't do it.

Signature. Have the person with the strongest client relationship/connection sign the cover letter. This might be the president of the company or the proposed project manager. (Unless the RFP requires an owner/principal signature to “bind” the company to the proposal agreement.)

Start your next proposal by crafting the cover letter first and you'll be well on your way to your next project win!