

Why Your Win Theme Isn't Winning

by Mercedes Thompson, MA

So, you checked all the boxes, and you still didn't win.

In fact, you went beyond compliance: you double- and triple-checked for misspellings, errors, and inconsistencies. The proposal layout was appealing and easy to navigate. The content was clear and concise. You demonstrated your knowledge of the client's issues. Your firm has the experience and your project manager is knowledgeable and well liked. And yet you didn't win.

A responsive proposal is not only compliant, but client focused. In A/E/C, the buzz around client focus is win themes. Win themes are client-focused benefit statements repeated throughout a proposal that tell a story about why your firm should be selected.

We hear from firms all the time that believe they submitted winning proposals but didn't win. We all know there are myriad reasons why a firm might not land a project even with an excellent proposal. But I'm interested in lost pursuits where firms were adequately positioned and out in front of the RFP, had gathered the necessary client intel, and put together the right team for the job—and yet still failed to produce a winning proposal.

Why is your win theme not winning?

1. The client doesn't care!

The most common reason your win theme isn't winning is that it's focused on something the client doesn't care about. To win any pursuit, you must get the client issues right. This is why I begin every pre-RFP strategy session and kick-off meeting with a discussion of the client issues or hot buttons. Client issues provide the framework for a SWOT analysis, competitor evaluation, and key proposal messaging. Always begin with what's keeping the client up at night and how you solve the client's problems.

To develop effective win themes, you must understand your client and offer solutions that speak directly to their priorities. Don't waste your time on solutions that the client doesn't need or firm differentiators that are irrelevant to the client's critical issues.

2. Focusing on the solution falls short.

Sometimes you get the client issue right, deliver a sound solution, and you still don't win. We understand your problem; here is our solution. You should win now, right?

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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!

Why Your Win Theme Isn't Winning, continued

Wrong. Showing understanding of the client's issue and providing a solution is important, but it falls short of a winning message because it doesn't convey the client benefit. If your solution is how you plan to solve the client's problem, the benefit is why the customer should care about that solution. You need both to win.

Don't assume your client understands what they get. Move beyond stating your solution and quantify the benefits.

Every win theme should not only identify your solution and how you solve the client's problem, but should also link that solution to a client benefit. Every win theme needs to answer the question, "So what?"

3. It doesn't separate you from the competition.

Another thing to consider is how the client chooses between competing firms who otherwise seem equal. High levels of competition are a reality of the A/E/C industry. Many firms can do the work. A few are well positioned and understand the client's issues. So, how do you differentiate yourself?

The truth is, there won't always be something truly unique to your firm. For the majority of pursuits, you'll have a hard time differentiating your firm from the competition. That's why it's important to remember that different is better than better.

A win theme doesn't have to include something groundbreaking that only you can offer, but it should strive to separate you from your competitors. People are naturally risk averse. You can separate yourself from the competition just by telling the client what they'll lose if they choose any other firm. People avoid risk, period.

4. It's not in your face.

One of the most common complaints I hear from technical teams when they're reviewing proposals is that we repeat information. They never like my answer: repetition is intentional and necessary. I call it the 3/3/3 rule. Clients will only remember three things from our proposal. To stick, those three things must be repeated at least three times. And we must assume clients are only spending three minutes reviewing our proposals.

Your win themes should be everywhere—embedded in your cover letter or executive summary and at the top of appropriate proposal sections. They should be written and conveyed visually. Don't fall into the trap of trying to develop several win themes and spreading them out. Stick with three or four and repeat them throughout the proposal; make it easy on your client.

5. No evidence.

Trust me, I've got this. Not the most convincing phrase I've ever heard. Yet, that's what a win theme without evidence says. Even if you get all the rest of it right, you have to give the client a reason to believe you. Proof is what differentiates an empty claim from a persuasive statement.

Win themes are one to two sentences each. I don't expect you to dive into the details of a past project and its results. That comes later. But equally incomprehensible is making an empty claim and assuming the client will take your word for it. Why should the client believe you? Prove it.

The Recipe:

Responsive proposals are not only compliant but client focused. Win themes are client-focused benefit statements repeated throughout a proposal that tell a story about why your firm should be selected.

After your team breaks down the critical client issues and develops thoughtful solutions, it's time to turn that discussion into win themes that quantify benefits and provide evidence.

Why Your Win Theme Isn't Winning, continued

BENEFIT + SOLUTION + EVIDENCE

Benefit = What does the client get? Why should the client care about your solution?

Solution = How will your firm solve the client's problem?

Evidence = Why should the client believe you?

Choose three to four win themes that speak to the client's critical issues. Make sure it's clear what the client has to lose by choosing another firm. And take the time to repeat that message throughout the proposal in clear writing and compelling visuals. If the client is going to walk away only remembering three things, make sure those win themes are what they remember.