In a fiercely competitive environment, as we've been experiencing over the past few years, small differences can play a major role in whether you win or lose a proposal competition.

Let's be honest with ourselves. We all provide the exact same services our competitors do. And for the most part, our qualifications and experiences are the same.

Just imagine how hard it is for proposal evaluators to pick one winner between many extremely similar options. In some cases, their choice could have a major impact on their career. Think about how challenging and scary that has to be for them.

### The Safe Bet

If you had to decide right now which peanut butter to use for the rest of your life, which would you pick? Would you pick Jif®, Peter Pan®, Skippy®, or Smuckers®? It's probably an easy question. You'll likely pick the one you have in your cabinet right now.

Ironically, the answer is so easy because the question is so difficult. All these products are essentially the same. So, the safe bet is the one you've gone with in the past.

Let me give you an example of what lengths people in our industry will go to make the safe bet. Just the other day, I was talking to an ex-chief engineer of a state department of transportation (DOT). We were talking about the selection process used at his DOT. He told me one of his most frustrating moments was when a project manager tried to select a firm she had used in the past even though the selection committee deemed another firm to be the most qualified. She took action to select her safe bet over a firm that was clearly more qualified to do the work.

That's what we are up against. Unless the client has used you before, you're not the safe bet. So, how can you compete? You compete by asking one simple question.

### The Question in Question

This single question can dramatically increase your proposal wins. But it may fly in the face of almost everything you've been taught about proposals. To help you understand the power behind this question, I need to tell you a little story about home insulation.

A few years back, there was an academic research study conducted on homeowners. The researchers went into people's houses and performed a free energy audit. They checked all of the weather stripping and insulation in each house. The homeowners were told these people were doing research on home energy use. But their research had nothing to do about energy. It was a social psychology experiment.

At the conclusion of the energy audit, half of the homeowners were told, "If you will insulate your home fully, you will be able to gain 50 cents a day, every day." The other half were told, "If you fail to insulate your home fully, you will lose 50 cents a day."

The researchers let some time pass and went back to see which homeowners insulated their houses. As they probably suspected, many more of the homeowners that chose to insulate their homes were the ones told they would lose 50 cents a day. Why is this?

It's because of a psychological principle known as loss aversion. We are more influenced by what we stand to lose than by what we stand to gain.

### What Will this Client Miss Out on if They Choose Someone Else?

Conventional wisdom has taught us to always tell clients what they will gain by choosing us. Ironically, that's not how our brains work. We are more influenced by what we stand to lose. So, a more powerful tactic is to tell the client what they stand to lose. What won't they get if they choose another firm? What is it that nobody else can provide them?

So the one question that can dramatically increase your proposal wins is:

> "What will this client miss out on if they choose someone else?"

Yes, this question is difficult to answer. But it's the type of question marketers were made for.

Decisionmakers often cling on to one attribute when deciding which firm to choose. Unless you've done superior research and have real insight into what your competitors will say in their proposal, you can't really predict what that attribute will be. And the decisionmakers' reasoning won't always be logical.

Here's another quick story. Once upon a time, there was a city government agency that chose an A/E firm to design a new facility. After the design was complete, the city council nixed the project, citing lack of funds.

So, this agency put out an RFP for firms to redesign their current facility. The safe bet would have been to choose the firm who designed the new facility for them. They had a great relationship with this designer and enjoyed working with them. But they didn't.

They could have chosen the team they felt knew the most about designing this type of facility. But they didn't.

Instead, they choose a firm that resided within the city limits. The committee believed giving the work to a business in the city would help sway the city council to give them the funds they needed for the renovation.

That was the one thing the other firms could not provide: the idea that using this local firm might help sway the city council's decision. If the agency chose one of the other firms, they would "lose out" on the slight possibility, this extra leverage, to change the council's thinking.

Asking, "What will this client miss out on if they choose someone else," forces you to identify the benefits that only your firm could provide. It's the single question that can dramatically increase your proposal wins.


### About the Author:

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