

Teamwork is a Contact Sport: Seven Skills of High-Performance Teams

By Mary C. Werner

"Teamwork is not a preference, it is a requirement."—John Wooden

Great perspective from the late, great basketball coach. And for the public accounting profession, truer words could not be spoken. From entry-level accountant to managing partner, CPAs work on multiple teams to achieve both individual and firm goals. An audit team works to provide the highest quality service to its audit client. Or a group of cross-functional CPAs for a specific industry group team up to provide solutions integral to a particular industry niche. A tax department is a team focused on serving a wide variety of clients and individuals over a time-intensive busy season and throughout the year. Or an *ad hoc* team is pulled together to develop a proposal to land a new client.

Whether you're a member of a client-serving team, an industry-focused team, a departmental team, a business-development team or quite possibly all four, effective teamwork is the lifeblood of a successful CPA firm. That's why Wooden's words

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Winning More Engagements by Improving Your Prospect Call and Proposal Letter

By Burt Bierman

Someone once defined a proposal letter for me as being "designed to quickly acquaint the reader with necessary information, while also convincing the reader that the letter's author is the best choice for the job." She went on to say it "typically includes a brief discussion of the problems the proposal is meant to address, and an overview of the salient information in the proposal."

The state of accounting proposal letters

In my 40-year career in accounting, and especially in my new role as a consultant and trainer for the accounting industry, I still believe that this definition is one of the most complete descriptions for a proposal letter that I have seen. In my own experience, I have had an opportunity to write, read and review several hundred proposal letters. I will share three insights with you: (1) they are not brief; (2) they do not limit themselves to sharing the "necessary information" and, most importantly, (3) they often don't address the problems that a proposal is meant to discuss.

What do the proposals look like that cross my desk? I see "mini brochures." They are generally well written, but wordy; they explain what seem to be all the features an accounting firm offers (even if not needed in this situation), and they try to position those features as "benefits" for the prospective client with little to back them up.

If you don't believe me, take a look at the last proposal you authored or assisted on. How often does it say "we?" Instead of talking about yourself and your firm, how many times do you refer to the prospect? Count up the "we's." If I was writing a proposal today, I would like that ratio to be about 70/30 with the 70 being references to the prospect and 30 being references to your firm. I'll bet if you are honest—and what CPA is not honest—the result is at best 40/60, but most are worse. And the same is true prospect calls: How many times do you say "we"?

Prospect call

But don't fear: There is help if you find yourself a victim of "we" syndrome. Here are some guidelines for conducting your pros-

General

1. Please bring us up to date on the success of your business since_____
2. What are some of your most pressing business problems?
3. How do you see us helping you address these challenges?
4. We want to be prepared for your future. Please tell us how you view your challenges over the next three to five years.
 - What growth plans do you have?
 - Do you plan to exit any markets?
5. We know you have been making an extensive investment in quality customer service and so have we. Please tell us the service standards you would like for us to provide you.
6. When it comes to managing your assets more effectively, are there ways you need for us to help you?
 - For example, your _____ seem to be improving each year. We noticed that _____ for _____ and for _____ were _____, Tell us about your goals here and how we might help. (What are the industry averages, specific other averages?)
7. How important is our satisfaction guarantee to you?
8. Is working with local professionals who have national and worldwide resources important to you?
9. Do you anticipate any mergers, purchases, divestitures, recapitalizations or reorganizations in the near future?
4. How important is assigning our most experienced people to your engagement?
5. How important is it to have continuity of personnel assigned to your work?
6. How important is rapid response on accounting and tax questions?
 - What do you consider rapid response?
7. How important are the national and international resources of our firm to you?
8. Do you see any barriers to working with our firm?
9. How critical is price to you? Approximately what is your pricing expectation?
10. Why are you changing auditors? What did you not like about your former firm that you do not want us to repeat?
11. What are the elements of our firm that can be of most benefit to you?
12. How did you enjoy working with your former firm?
13. Do you envision any other changes in your needs?
14. Would you please review your audit committee meeting dates and how you would want us to interface with them?
15. Would you review with us the best field work dates in which we can interface with your accounting staff?
16. How do you envision your staff availability and capability to provide audit assistance?
17. In addition to the company's annual report, do you anticipate needing other reports from us?
 - If so, what reports and who will be the users?
18. Are you concerned about any of your asset, liability or income statement accountants where we should pay particular close attention?

Accounting and auditing

1. What are the vital elements you want from your accounting and auditing service provider?
2. Are there some things, while not vital, that would be nice for us to provide you?
3. How important is regular personal interaction among our executives and yours?

19. Do you have any tax savings opportunities we should explore?
20. Are there any tax audits in progress or contemplated?
21. Will your new computer installation enable you to decrease your SG&A expenses? Are there areas we can help you explore to help you drive down these costs?
22. How are your computers helping you?
23. How would you feel about our partners regularly touring operations in order to better understand your business and find ways to help you be more profitable?

Management

1. As a part of our engagement, we invest a certain amount of time understanding your business. For example, we are continuously training on, reading about and studying your business.
In what ways do you suggest we best learn about your business so we can relate your operations to the financial information and so we can be more proactive in helping you maximize your business success?
2. If we invested (nonchargeable time) in attending certain of your internal management meetings as observers, would you be comfortable with this?

pect call and crafting an improved proposal letter. These together should help you win more engagements.

1. Make sure you begin all prospect meetings by asking about *their* needs and aspirations. Your goal is to *listen* and to gain an understanding of what services are needed from you. Avoid offering solutions, just sit back and *actively listen*.

We like to think of this as naive listening. In other words, listen like you're meeting the prospect for the very first time. Think of it like a first date. As you listen, try not to express any preconceived notions of what the prospect may need or want. Take notes, it shows you're concerned and that what your prospect is saying is important to you. Also, people tend to provide more detailed information if they know you are recording what they say.

Always ask dialogue questions in order to engage the prospect in discussing their goals, aspirations, fears, desires, *etc.* Dialogue questions are designed to

query for explanations, not just yes-or-no answers. This has an enormous psychological impact, as everyone's favorite topic is usually themselves. Following is a list of prospect-oriented questions. Pick and choose the ones that would work best in your particular circumstances:

Once you've gathered what is likely to be a great deal of information, you can focus on the issues that are really important for the prospect. Generally, you will find three to five critical items with which to guide the prospect's decision. How you deal with those three to five issues may determine whether you win or lose the engagement. Do not include information that the prospect has not expressed an interest in. Remember, you are writing to a high-level officer or an owner. (See following Executive Summary.)

2. I would include one page in the proposal letter for each of the critical items you have identified. Use the opportunity to explain the issue, as you understand it, and demonstrate how your ser-

vices will resolve the issue and create *value* for the prospect.

3. The prospect call is clearly more important in the decision-making process than the proposal letter. However, if you unable to translate your top grade prospect call into a coherent letter addressing the critical prospect issues, you will not likely win the engagement. It is like winning the league championship, then losing the Super Bowl because you failed to execute your game plan.

Assertions versus proof

Once you assert that you can resolve the prospect's issues, you need to offer proof of your claim. Keep in mind that your competition may be able to find out all the same things you discovered during the prospect call. So, how do you win the work? Being able to show results will give you a significant advantage. The strongest proof would be to make sure the prospect speaks with a current client who is willing to share your ability to resolve their same or similar challenges. Easier said than done.

The next best thing would be a testimonial letter. I've had great experiences when I include excerpts from testimonial letters as a side bar in the proposal document. Lastly, you can add "war stories" or case studies showing how you resolved similar issues and added value to the client. Prospects will be comforted by being among others who have experienced great results from your offering.

Executive summary

The attention span of many of the readers may be short. Remember, the further up the corporate ladder the reader is, the less time he or she will want to spend reading details. To address this, you can write an executive summary that lists all the important issues. Prioritize them so that you are dealing with the most important issue first. Reference the details in the proposal letter, and remind the reader of how you have proved your firm's value. Proof can—and should—be, the deciding factor. After all, how would you choose a CPA firm?

Fee summary

Most of the time, the fee summary is buried in the back of the letter. Firms do this because they feel the decision-maker must understand the entire proposal before he/she can appreciate the fees. Regardless, most readers go to this section first! So let them have it their way. I suggest that immediately after the Executive Summary, include the fee proposal. If you do a great job with the Executive Summary, adding the fees here will work. Do not be shy about your fees. After all, if you deliver real value and can prove it, fees do become less critical.

Deliver a draft of the proposal letter

One last thing to consider is a strategy that I've used successfully involving delivering the proposal letter as a finished product, but marked "draft." In that meeting, it is crucial to ask if you have covered all the important issues. From time to time, additional issues surface (even after your last meeting with the

prospect) and your letter does not discuss these issues. In a case like this, bringing the document as a draft will allow you to easily adjust the final letter.

Summary

Focus the process on your prospect and the value you bring to them. Do not dwell on how good your firm is. Frankly, they are only interested in how your firm can help them. Ask pointed questions to uncover all the critical challenges facing the prospect and follow the guidelines I've described, and you will win more engagements, I guarantee it.

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Teamwork

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are so relevant to the public accounting profession.

When teams work effectively, you see tangible results. Teams are:

- **More Productive:** no getting sidetracked by behind-the-scenes infighting
- **More Stable:** team members become committed to something greater than themselves, creating a strong bond among team members and loyalty to the firm

- **More Innovative:** we all know that two heads are better than one, and better solutions to complex challenges can result from working in a high-performance team
 - **More Profitable:** when teams come together with improved productivity, lower turnover and solutions for its client's tough challenges, there's a positive impact on the bottom line
- So, if teamwork is so critical to the success of our firms, what are the skills required of a high-performance team? And how do

we incorporate these skills into our daily activities? How can we enhance team effectiveness, knowing that fostering such high performance is one of our most critical roles as a leader? How can we move individuals from "I" to "We"?

The answer to these questions doesn't lie in studying a new technical accounting standard or researching a section of the Internal Revenue Code. They lie in developing the "soft" skills that are an integral part of our ability to connect with others,