

Selling Your Innovation

How to Write a Winning Proposal Abstract

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Introduction

If you build a better mousetrap, the world won't know about it unless you tell them. The greatest technology in the world can go unnoticed. So being able to clearly communicate to others the salient points of your solution is crucial to success. In other words, good communication is essential.

If you have a solution that you think fits a requesting organization's needs, then the next step is to communicate to that organization what your solution can do to solve their problem. The way to do this is to prepare a well-crafted proposal abstract that gets across your message as clearly as possible.

Selling Your Idea: The Process

In accordance with the NineSigma model, a requesting organization engages NineSigma to help them find a solution to a problem in research, product development, analytics, business processes, manufacturing, or even marketing. NineSigma then seeks out those companies or organizations that can potentially provide the needed solution.

This is where your solution comes in. The fact that you were invited to submit an abstract proposal means that NineSigma targeted your technical expertise. As a result, you have the opportunity to identify yourself to the requesting organization as having a potential viable solution.

You've arrived at the point of making a proposal. You've reviewed the requesting organization's needs and know that your organization has a solution to their problem. So how do you communicate the strengths of your solution? In short, this is your opportunity to convey to the organization that your product or service is what they're looking for; that your technology has the necessary performance characteristics to fit the organization's needs. So what you have to do is provide compelling information that will convince the decision makers that your proposal is reason enough to engage in further dialogue with you.

This is your opportunity to sell your idea.



The Proposal Abstract

The process begins with NineSigma issuing a Request for Proposal, or RFP, on behalf of a client company. NineSigma sends the RFP to potential solution providers for review and action. The solution provider then responds with a document called a Proposal Abstract. When an organization responds with a proposal abstract, they need to tell what their technology or product can do. This can include providing data describing performance, or data that compares performance to existing technology which also addresses the client's needs.

A good starting point in preparing a proposal abstract is a template provided by NineSigma. This is a downloadable Word document that can be obtained from the NineSigma website for each RFP. The Proposal Abstract template is specific to each individual RFP.

The critical features involved in selling a successful response to a client include stressing the benefits of your technology over existing technology. Other useful information is a description of your own organization's expertise and why a client should engage with your organization. An important goal of the proposal abstract is to introduce your product or technology to the requesting organization in order to create interest among them and to set up the potential for further dialogue.

What to Include

Key points to keep in mind when writing a proposal abstract:

- 1) Include only non-confidential information.
- 2) Tell WHAT, not HOW.
- 3) Focus on the benefit of your solution.
- 4) Focus on why your technology/solution is better than competitive solutions. If competing solutions have problems or drawbacks, how does your solution avoid them and how is it better?
- 5) Avoid jargon. Use the language of science/engineering/technology. You are not talking to laymen. You are talking to practitioners of the client's technology.

Generally, the proposal abstract should be a summary of non-confidential information no more than three pages in length. This should include a brief description of what the technology can do, not how the technology works; why it's better than existing technology, and why the organization should be interested. The proposal abstract should also include a section on your organization's expertise and experience.

Other documents can also be included along with the main proposal abstract. Examples would include published papers or product literature such as specifications or data sheets. Also, any diagrams or schematics that would help to further explain the concept or technology should also be included where appropriate. In some cases, organizations also include product samples, CVs, resumes, and photos or graphics.

Another key point is to avoid jargon. Even though respondents are communicating with very skilled scientists and product developers and business people, a

technical approach without jargon is most appropriate. In other words, keep in mind that you're addressing the decision makers and the people with the technical and business knowledge to make the final decision directly. Your proposal is not being filtered through other layers of company personnel not directly connected with the final decision-making process. It is also worth mentioning that NineSigma does not screen out responses and send only select ones to the requesting organization. They send everything to the organization and the organization decides, so you are addressing the decision makers directly.

Differences Between Proposal and Grant Writing

The key difference between writing a proposal abstract and a grant proposal is that you're not going to be completely judged on the proposal abstract alone. The document you prepare is non-confidential and it is simply a selling opportunity to present your innovation for further discussion. Generally, the requesting organization is not looking to fund long-term basic research projects, as is most often the goal when writing a grant proposal. Instead, they either intend to fund a research project that will take them into a proof of concept stage and/or to technology transfer, or they are looking for a ready technology that they can quickly incorporate into a bigger product development project within the organization.

Research contracts from an organization generally range between \$50,000 and \$500,000, with project times from 6 to 24 months. At the end of an agreed upon period of time, the solution provider and the requesting organization will then be involved in some type of transfer of technology which could include licensing the technology, a joint development, co-marketing or OEM supplier relationship.

The requesting organization is looking for the best solution to their immediate needs and may engage a number of solution providers in discussions to determine which potential solution best fits their needs.

The norm for writing grant proposals is to describe in great detail how something will work. A requesting organization, on the other hand, wants to know what the technology or product can do for them. They will be asking the question "What can you do for me today that is better than what I can do now?"

Next Steps: What to Expect

So what should you expect after you've submitted a proposal abstract?

For starters, it usually takes one to three months for an organization to review proposals. NineSigma will then let respondents know if they've been selected for progression or not. If they were not selected, they may be able to receive feedback directly from the organization as to why they were not selected.

If selected for progression, the next step would be a conversation either with NineSigma or directly with the requesting organization to answer any outstanding questions.

If both parties wish to proceed, then the requesting organization would initiate some type of contract. This could either be a confidentiality agreement for further detailed discussion, a face-to-face meeting, or a submission of samples for testing.

This could also include material transfer and non-analysis agreements. This allows evaluation of the technology for the requesting organization's purposes. A non-analysis agreement is one that prohibits an organization from analyzing your material and possibly uncovering proprietary information or company secrets. The organization can still test your solution to see if it works, if it does what you claim it does, but they can't analyze it and determine how it works as this is your company's proprietary information. This is a part of confidentiality.

The final step would be some sort of contract setting up an official business relationship. This could include licensing, a research contract, a company acquisition, or a joint development. (See sidebar.)

Technology Transfer Possibilities

- Licensing
- OEM Supply
- Joint Development
- Co-Marketing
- Purchase
- Joint Venture
- Shared Risk/Reward
- Research Contract
- Supply Agreement
- Services Agreement
(Consulting, Service Provider)



Fears and Concerns

For most potential supplier companies, the biggest concern in preparing a proposal abstract is how to protect sensitive intellectual property (IP). A legitimate concern is that a small company with few resources will present an idea to a large organization which in turn is in a position to use their idea without proper compensation.

So the question becomes how to present an idea without losing intellectual property. However, it's important to realize that the requesting organization is just as concerned about intellectual property as the potential solution provider. This is why the proposal abstract has to be non-confidential. This protects the solution provider's intellectual property and it also protects the requesting organization from inappropriately and inadvertently receiving proprietary information for which they can have some liability. This is why the non-confidential aspect of the proposal abstract is so important to both parties.

Another concern is that a company's proposal will tend to get lost amidst thousands of other proposals. This fear is based largely on the reality of submitting academic proposals for grants. However, the number of respondents to a request is not in the thousands or even the hundreds of responses. Therefore, a company's proposal has a much higher chance of getting far greater attention than a typical academic grant proposal.

Some companies are concerned about the cost to them of preparing a proposal abstract. There is no cost to respondents other than a modest commitment of time to prepare a compelling proposal abstract. Requesting organizations pay NineSigma, who in turn reaches out to the global solution provider community. NineSigma is not a party to a contract with a potential supplier. They are strictly

the broker that connects the requesting organization with the solution provider.



The organizations seeking solutions that work with NineSigma are generally global, multi-national companies with global distribution. As such, they are open to solutions from anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

The process of writing a proposal abstract and submitting to a requesting organization represents an ideal opportunity to get your technology commercialized. There are a number of ways for this to occur including licensing agreements, joint development, a joint venture, research contracts, supplier agreements, and agreements for services such as consulting.

In the end, your technology will have a better chance of getting out into the world. In addition to the financial rewards, there is the intellectual satisfaction of helping to solve a technical problem, making something better, and ultimately of helping humanity.



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