

## **DON'T TALK TO CUSTOMERS LIKE THEY'RE CONTRACTORS**

*Cynthia Paul – FMI*

Presenting effectively is actually very simple. All you have to do is tell the customer how you will solve their unique concerns, and you'll most likely win the project. Of course, delivering the message well is also important.

So why do so many contractors keep talking to customers as if customers are contractors? The reality is that most customers really are not interested in construction. They are much more interested in their own business. For the typical customer, construction is an elaborate hassle.

What they really want is additional floor space to expand their manufacturing capability, or a better office environment to support the growth of their business, or a distribution system that gets product to their customers when needed. What they don't want is another construction project.

Effectiveness comes from a high level of understanding about the customer, their needs, and their wants. Those issues are the customer's hot buttons. Too often, contractors' presentations focus on what the contractor does well rather than an explanation of how the customer's problems can be solved. The contractor points out how they will be on time and on budget and that they have good people who are safe and deliver good quality. All of these qualities are nice to have – the problem is they do not capture the client's attention or sell many projects.

Truly effective presentations are crafted before the RFP hits the streets. But that is not always possible. If you're finding out about a project opportunity through an RFP, then you're starting one step behind the race to win the project.

Customer hot buttons are the really exciting points that spice up your presentation with real-world issues that resonate with the customer. The challenge is that hot buttons are not fully contained in the RFP. You need to find out what business concerns they have and what the true business purpose of the project is. You need to know what keeps them up at night worrying. You need to learn about their past project experience and find out what they are currently thinking about contractors.

We all think of our own business in great levels of detail. We can recall lots of facts and figures, technical information, market impacts, and people snags. However, the tendency in presentations is to discuss customer issues in vague terms.

It's not uncommon to hear a contractor say, "We'll get you into the building on time." That's important, but it is too vague of a concept to get the customer's attention.

Whatever the reason, tell the customer you can get them in on the right date to meet *their* needs and say it in the same words that they use internally. If you can do that and deliver the message confidently, you will win their favor.

Here are a few more presentation tips:

1. Plan your presentation to end five minutes early. You'll come across as well-organized and prepared.
2. Bring no more than one person less on your team than the customer has.
3. Use audiovisuals to keep the customer's attention and give you an excuse to get to your feet. Standing demonstrates your confidence in your approach.

4. Build your presentation to meet the needs of both technical reviewers and senior managers. Intermix factual information with a big-picture orientation.
5. Simplify your message. Cover only the most pressing issues. Spending more time on fewer issues will position you as the contractor of choice since it will be obvious you're the one that truly understands what the customer wants. Pick the issues based on the customer's hot buttons. Don't worry; all the other items are contained in your proposal.
6. Use at least three to five audiovisuals, such as project boards, handouts, samples, brochures, and electronic presentations.
7. Dress appropriately for the audience. Call ahead to see what the typical dress code is. There's no sense showing up in a suit and tie to a casual company. That's lost many contractors projects in the high-tech world.

Don't talk to customers like they are contractors. Talk to them in their own language, and you'll win more projects.

*Cynthia Paul is FMI's national practice leader for business development and business unit manager for specialty contractors. She will be one of the presenters at ABC's 2003 CEO Institute.*

**(Box this Info)**

## **2003 CEO Institute**

***Exclusively for Company Owners/Principals***

Friday, February 7, 2003 -- 8AM to 12 Noon

### **Session I**

Attracting and Maintaining Employees, Developing Your Next Generation of Leaders, and Understanding Generation X.

Friday, March 7, 2003 -- 8AM to 12 Noon

### **Session II**

Customer / Client Satisfaction, What Do Clients Really Want from Contractors – Customer Development

Friday, April 4, 2003 -- 8AM to 12 Noon

### **Session III**

Contract Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Strategies for Success

Friday, May 2, 2003 -- 8AM to 12 Noon

### **Session IV**

Succession / Business Continuation Plan, Exit Strategies for Owners, Ownership Transfer.

\$1250 per CEO / Principal – *Includes one additional company representative free.*

The HIGHLANDER Inn – 2 Highlander Way, Manchester NH

Registration limited to 20 CEO/Principal attendees and their guest.

Registration Deadline – Friday, January 17, 2003

For more information, or to register, please call the ABC NH/VT Chapter Office at 603/ 226-4789 or email us at [info@abcnhvt.org](mailto:info@abcnhvt.org).