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Trends Paper

Proposal Developers Count on Branding to Give Them an Edge in the Selection Process

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Study Confirms Developers Use Brand to Convey Quality, History, and Performance Stability

At A Glance

This research study examines the role of brand in proposal development and supports the belief that branding does play a part in the success of any proposal. The trends report also observes:

- Drivers of format used for proposals
- Level of consistency and customization in proposal development
- Limitations faced in proposal development
- Average amount of time and money spent on the proposal process

Who was Surveyed?

5,500+ SMPS members surveyed

1,000+ respondents

Proposal Developers in:

- Architecture
- Engineering
- Construction

Conducted in partnership between Society for Marketing Professional Services and GBC Document Finishing Group.

Methodology

In January 2007, more than 5,500 proposal developers were surveyed by the Society of Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) and GBC to determine what they thought the most important aspects of their new project proposals were, specifically with regard to branding, content, format, and packaging.

A large majority of the respondents represented proposal developers in the architectural, engineering, and construction markets that held titles within management such as marketing directors, coordinators, project managers, account executives, engineering/construction facility managers or principals.

Primarily, the study was conducted to determine how important, and at what level, branding plays a part in the actual development and delivery of project proposals.

The study examined the drivers of the format used for proposals, identified the amounts of consistency and customization in proposal development and delivery, defined the limitations faced in proposal development and helped quantify the average amount of time and money spent on the proposal process and their impact on ROI.

Further, the study supports the belief that branding does play a part in the success of any proposal.

The proposals discussed in the study fell into two categories, qualification-based and fee-based. Qualification proposals are generally longer and take more time to put together; of those surveyed, an average 40 hours are spent on qualification-based proposals and an average 23 hours are spent developing fee-based proposals. The developers

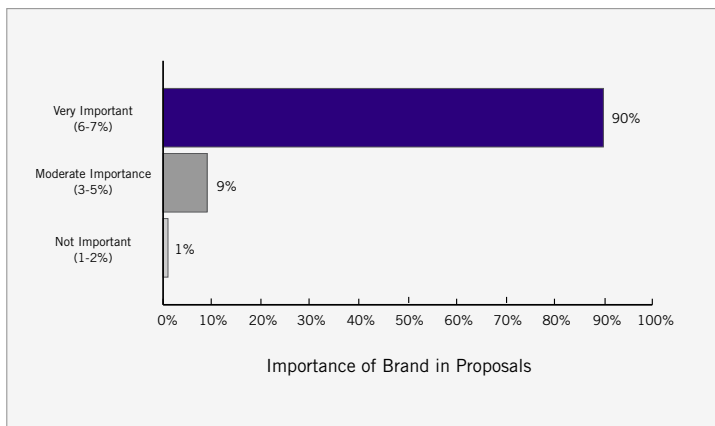
who identified themselves in marketing positions frequently reported completing qualifications-based proposals, while developers who identified themselves as owners or in management positions reportedly completed more fee-based proposals.

Interestingly, fee-based proposals are most often associated with projects like office buildings, hospitality/entertainment, and residential buildings while qualification-based proposals are most often developed for government, cities and schools. For the purposes of this study, both kinds of proposals were included in the definition of a 'proposal'.

Proposal Developers Said Branding Helps A Proposal Get Noticed

In general, respondents within the building and construction industries found branding to be an important component in the perceived value of their proposals. Almost all respondents indicated they thought it was important that their proposals portray and represent their company's brand, and nearly 90 percent rated branding as very important. A third of the respondents indicated they believe their brand has a large effect on moving their proposal to the final stage of the review process because it was the best way to communicate their company's ideals, signify a joint effort with the proposed company, and provide a more professional image. Many respondents felt it was this initial impression of their company that helped facilitate a call back.

With all of this in mind, branding then becomes an important tool in making a first impression. Proposal developers supported this in the survey by indicating they use branding in the form of company name, logo, color scheme, and graphic design or layout to distinguish themselves from other companies.



Those in the Architecture industry are significantly more likely than those in Engineering to say that it is important to portray and represent their company's brand in a proposal.

Logos and color schemes were most often cited to establish a brand image within proposals, but other areas include integration of unique services available, writing style or approach, market niche, photographs and a measure of their local presence. Mention of these less tangible effects on a brand seems to indicate that most developers feel brand goes beyond just the colors; they attach value to their brand with examples of their footprint within the community or industry.

It therefore is not surprising to find that a majority of the developers thought that, in order to make a proposal successful, they had to focus on more than just a logo and a color scheme. Without a doubt, a combination of content and format are the heart of any proposal, so ensuring the key messages and the company image are portrayed within both is essential.

Form and Function Go Hand-in-Hand

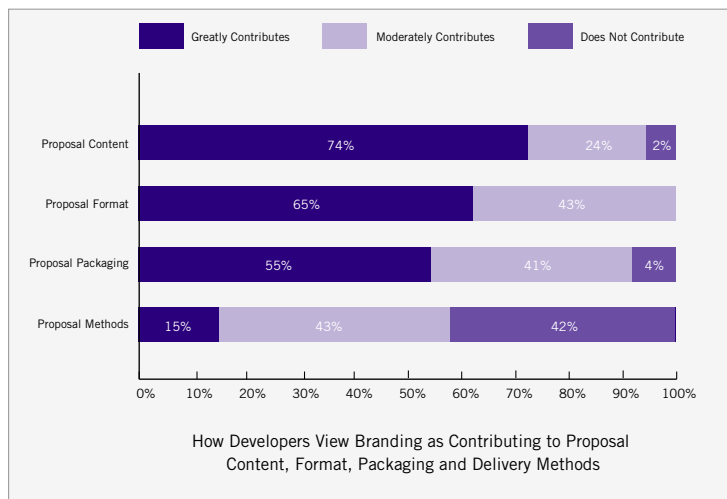
A proposal's content is seen by about three quarters of developers as having a large effect on moving a proposal to its final stages. Specifically, engineering professionals are significantly more likely than those in construction to think content has a large effect on moving a proposal to the final stages.

The overall areas of content most often used in proposals were: firm overviews, resumes, cover letter, and project experience followed closely by project approach and references. The content areas that are most often customized are: cover letter, project approach, project experience, and resumes, with organizational charts

rounding out the top five customized areas. Those in the architectural field were more likely to customize cover letters and key messages while those in engineering were more likely to customize project and technical experience; construction professionals were more likely to customize a time line.

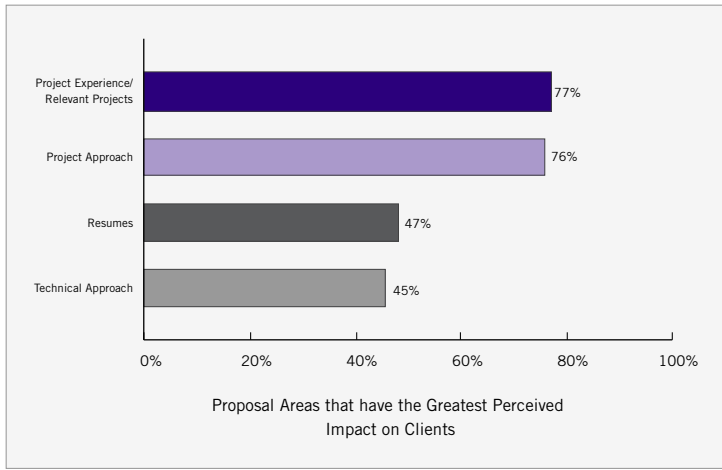
The four most time consuming content areas of proposal development were: project approach, technical approach, experience, and resumes, which notably are also the areas that are believed to create the most lasting impact.

In terms of formatting, about half of respondents felt a proposal's format had a large effect on getting the proposal to the final bidding stages. Developers who felt brand is important for their proposal to be accepted were also likely to have formatting standards for the amount of white space and type of charts used. Overall the most standardized areas of formatting are: logo usage, paper size, font type, page layout and font size. Conversely the most customized areas of format are the use of specific photos, graphics, illustrations and chart types.



Those in the Architecture industry are significantly more likely to think that format contributes to the branding of their proposal than those in Engineering and Construction.

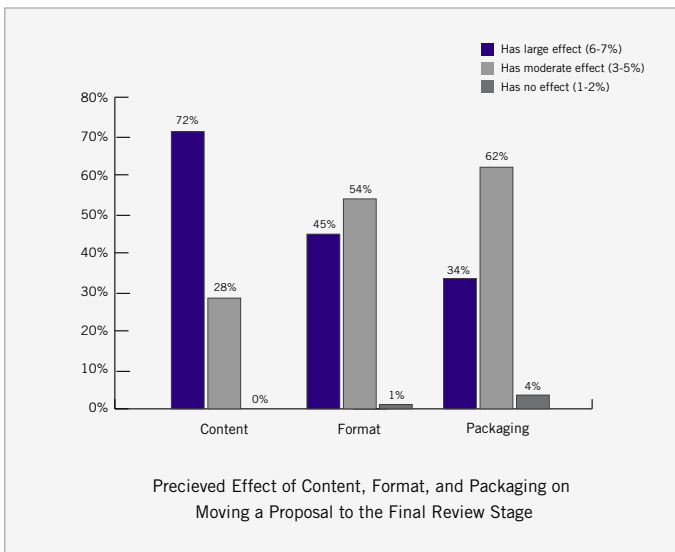
When deciding on a proposal's format, the RFP specifications as well as ease of understanding and client use were considered most important. Consistency across the document and the need to stand out from the competition are also strong considerations when developing a format.



Those who see brand as important in moving their proposal to the final stages are significantly more likely to see the executive summary, company mission statement, and firm overview and background as having the greatest impact.

Packaging and Delivery Play a Role

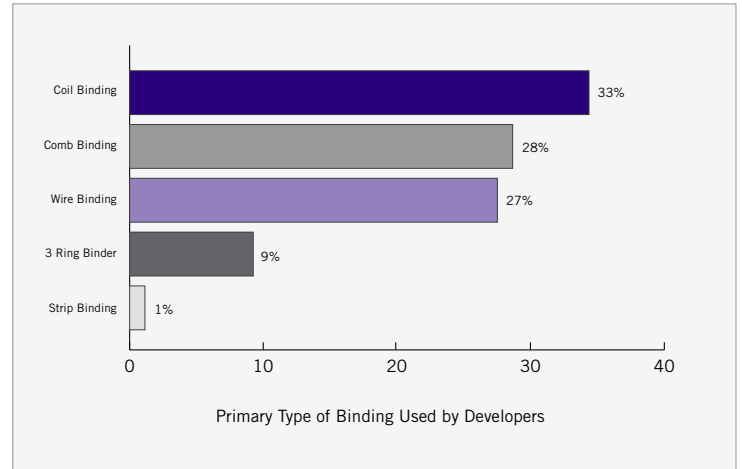
A proposal's packaging was highlighted as having a large effect on getting to the last stage of review. A third of the respondents said that packaging differs by situation, especially for those that felt branding was essential. Overall, packaging the proposal takes, on average, less than 10 percent of the total time spent on development. Cost seems to be the primary motivator on how proposals are packaged, and developers indicated they prefer delivering hard-copy proposals via delivery express services. When they do send them electronically, email is preferred over CDs or uploading via a website.



Engineering professionals are significantly more likely than those in Construction to think content has a large effect on moving a proposal to the final stages.

Those who see brand as important in moving a proposal to the final stages are significantly more likely to say content, format and packaging have a large effect.

Most developers indicated that proposal packaging is typically completed in-house with equipment in the department and the majority of respondents print in color. Nearly all of the developers said they bind their proposals; coil binding was preferred. Card stock and plastic rated among the top materials used to package proposals, and respondents that thought branding was important were more likely to customize these pieces.



Those in Engineering use comb binding significantly more than all other groups while those in Architecture use wire binding significantly more often than all others.

A high percentage of respondents, nine for every ten, said they use tabs in their proposals. These tabs are most often created in-house. The construction market uses tabs the most often and when used they are likely to be standardized. Respondents in the architectural and engineering industries change the tabs in their presentations and are more likely to deal with the tabs for each proposal separately.

Branded Proposals Better Received

Nearly two thirds of the respondents said packaging is an important part of standing out from the competition which suggests the repeatability and quality of the standardized pieces is top of mind when developing proposals.

Those who place more importance on brand are significantly more likely to have a budget set aside for proposal development.

Budget is a key step in proposal development that is often overlooked. More than half the respondents said they do not have a pre-determined budget, but estimate they spend the same amount on each proposal; an average of \$3,255 in out-of-pocket expenses. The majority of those with a budget spend more than \$50,000 annually. The highest reported annual budget was over \$800,000.

With that kind of money being invested, the study also sought to determine if respondents measure ROI. A quarter of the respondents actually measured ROI. Those that indicated they put a greater emphasis on branding were more likely to measure ROI and had more proposals accepted. However, they also had the lowest ROI suggesting that even though their branding works on increasing business, they could benefit from a more efficient, streamlined approach to proposal development to achieve the same goal while spending less money.

The Human Factor

Ultimately, the most significant resources in proposal development are the developers themselves. Many reported that the time it takes to pull everything together and the deadlines in place were the most limiting factors in overall development. This supports the need for a solid proposal process that includes sets of standardized proposal materials as well as content resources and templates.

The study also demonstrates that setting budgets and leveraging internal resources are the quickest paths to success, and that branding is the common denominator in most successful proposals. Therefore, a quick route to achieving a better proposal development process lies in how often and how easily brand can be incorporated in the content, format, and packaging.

There are many ways in which any organization can achieve the cost savings and repeatability that set their proposals apart. One way is to create an electronic library of the common content used in your proposals: mission statements, firm overviews, and key messages. Another way is to stock pre-branded packaging and content components like covers and tabs. Inventory of these items can be managed online over many sites creating an effective economy of scale—especially for those organizations with budgets over \$100,000.

Leverage Internal Resources

- Set up company-wide web-based brand guidelines
- Establish a centralized, web-based resource center
- Create a company brand webinar
- Develop a quick reference guide
- Develop a sample/example reference guide
- Promote employee brand ownership
- Develop an interdepartmental brand team
- Get buy-in from top management
- Appoint or be a brand champion

Standardized materials, including content and packaging where appropriate, are one of the easiest ways to convey brand imagery. Having materials on-hand that are consistent, targeted, and easy to use will reduce the back end development time, especially for those organizations that develop the more time consuming qualification proposals.

For more information about GBC Brand Image Solutions® and how expert consultants can help strengthen your company's brand image, call 888-240-4219. For complete survey results go to www.gbconnect.com/brandimage.

About GBC

GBC, an ACCO Brands business has served a broad range of document communication needs for businesses worldwide for 60 years. Our products and services, including binding and laminating solutions, custom presentation solutions and technical service, are critical to our customers in helping them distinguish their printed materials and achieve a professional edge in today's competitive market. ACCO Brands Corporation is a world leader in select categories of branded office products, with annual revenues of nearly \$2 billion. Its industry-leading brands include Day-Timer®, Swingline®, Kensington®, Quartet®, GBC®, Rexel®, NOBO®, and Wilson Jones®, among others. Under the GBC brand, the company is also a leader in the professional print finishing market.

About SMPS

The Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) was created in 1973 by small group of professional services firm leaders who recognized the need to sharpen skills, pool resources, and work together to create business opportunities. Today, the association has a membership of more than 5,600+ marketing and business development professionals from architectural, engineering, planning, interior design, construction, and specialty consulting firms located throughout the United States and Canada.

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