

Working Effectively with Procurement

Question

How can I build a relationship during the sales process if it's run by procurement?

Answer

In recent years, the use of procurement processes to select and buy services has increased substantially. Here are seven tips to help you work more effectively with procurement executives and make the best of a request for proposal (RFP) process:

1. Understand the needs and goals of procurement. All of the basic principles that should guide relationship building with other types of clients also apply here. Good procurement managers are not just focused on obtaining the lowest price, unless they are buying sheet metal—and even then, quality, service, and other factors enter into the equation. Generally, procurement wants good value—quality at the best price, with a reliable supplier that can offer ongoing support and responsiveness.
2. Help them achieve their goals and improve their own processes. Can you make suggestions to improve your client's procurement process? Are there additional questions it should be asking the various competitors? Could the program it is seeking bids on be restructured in a more efficient manner?
3. Within the RFP constraints, be creative. While you generally do have to fill out all the forms and check all the right boxes, there's no rule in an RFP that says you cannot be creative and demonstrate original thinking in your approach.
4. Bring the actual team to the presentation. Often, companies send a "pitch" team to an RFP presentation, but few any members of this group will actually do the work if they win the bid. You can differentiate yourselves by showcasing the specific individuals who will constitute the delivery team. The message is, "What you see is what you get."
5. Engage the buyers during the pitch. During most procurement processes, you will have the opportunity to make a presentation to a selection panel that includes the senior executives who will make the final decision and with whom you will work during the actual engagement. During this time you have the opportunity to look and feel differently from your competitors. Turn the "pitch" into a collaborative working session. Inquire as to which aspects of your presentation they would like to focus on. Ask the panel thoughtful questions and pause frequently to get their reactions to what you are saying. Describe specific examples to illustrate your points.
6. If it is a current client, try to help shape the RFP. If you have a pre-existing relationship with the client you may be able to influence the focus and scope of the procurement before it is finalized.
7. Don't go around them. Procurement managers play an important role, and the best ones are just as focused on quality, performance, and finding a suitable fit as any other client would be. Don't treat them like annoyances but rather as important individuals, and never give them the feeling that you are going around them to top management to unduly influence the procurement process.