

Review by Vanessa Britt

**Plugging the holes in a leaky bucket: winning re-bids, improving client retention**

**Presenters:**

Nigel Thacker – MD, Rebidding Solutions Ltd

Andrew Shaw – MD, Business Services Growth

APMP UK Chapter Event held at Easthampstead Park, Wokingham, Berks., on Wednesday 22nd May 2013

With no disrespect to the speakers (Andrew Shaw and Nigel Thacker), before even reaching the conference room, it didn't matter to me if the session on Re-bidding and Client Retention was uninteresting – because the setting was beautiful. But I shan't harp on poetically about racing up a woods-lined Romanesque 'straight-as-an-arrow' road before bursting out from the trees to experience the fabulous dramatic impact of the 1860's mansion house fully revealed in its gorgeous architectural glory.

So to the APMP event: Our first speaker, Andrew, didn't just highlight the statistics and corporate impact of losing existing business - like twitchy investors and increase to competitor's market share. He empathised with the human side, the effect on *us*; where losing business equates to staff cuts and lowered morale.

It seems obvious, but it's good to be reminded of how easily you can lose business under a re-bid situation and what you can do to "plug those holes in your leaky bucket".

Three top reasons for losing customers are:

- poor service and performance (your current service provision matters, but is not the sole determinant of re-bid success)
- poor relationship with the customer (it needs to be solid and maintained)
- poor value for money

So, how do you avoid being in these situations to start with? How do you measure them, track them, and monitor them? Naturally, one is consciously aware that losing a re-bid = losing a customer = losing future profit etc. But when Andrew actually put this into perspective, it is even scarier: "if, for example, your sales are growing at 8% year on year, losing 10% in a year from an existing customer means you have to earn an additional 2% of contracts year-on-year *"just to stand still"*.

While seemingly a contradictory concept to compare Retention vs Loss; for me, part of the presenters' solution for retaining customers drew parallels with a quest to lose weight – you know what you need to do, everyone can tell you what you need to do...but it can be hard work that takes time, commitment, effort and perhaps some good guidance. The message I received from our speakers regarding re-bid success / customer retention, is that the sooner your company / team starts on the right path and addresses the issue(s), the sooner

your business (or body) is in the right shape for further success. It does require forethought and planning but there are methods and best practices out there for re-bidding.

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After Andrew's presentation on how to plug the holes in our leaky bucket, Nigel came on with a massive message for the day which focussed largely on the "C"-word. COMPLACENCY. Complacency KILLS.

- Complacency in not using your best team for the re-bid response.
- Complacency in not answering the questions.
- Complacency in assuming the customer knows your answers.
- Complacency in not *listening* to what the *customer wants* and just assuming you know.
- Complacency in thinking that doing more of the same will work again in the re-bid.

Yes, as the current provider we have the experience of working with the customer, but "fresh ideas" are an important oversight. My personal take on this last example of complacency is that while there is a lot to be said for NOT "re-inventing the wheel" – it's an entirely different story if you don't recognise that the customer has *moved on* from the wheel! [in the spirit of my slightly wonky analogy, I'd love to see what has superseded the wheel!]. So the question we must remember to ask ourselves is *WHY* is the customer re-tendering? Do they have a different focus? A different strategy? WE, the incumbents, NEED to pay attention and understand it.

Similarly, you have to be careful in your pricing strategy. While, as the existing supplier, you likely have an advantage that comes with familiarity and time with your customer's business (perhaps being able to deliver quicker and/or cheaper), if you re-bid 25% cheaper to do the same work, you can expect to find your organisation having to answer questions about why you weren't doing it for 25% less in the first place.

The Do's and Don'ts of Andrew's and Nigel's presentation were great reminders of the obvious so it surprised me to learn that incumbent suppliers often don't actually even answer all the proposal questions(!?) because we assume that the customer already knows our answer. We need to remember that a re-bid is still a formal, scored process! Ultimately, a re-bid does need to be treated with the same care, commitment and *hunger* as a new bid.

And on to another "C"-word.....COMMUNICATION. We need to do it at all levels, across all facets of the bid. Would you, as a bid team member, consider not communicating with, say, your Operations team when preparing a new proposal response? No?....so then why on a re-bid?

Nigel concluded by reminding us of the importance of early involvement and preparation, as well as the need to accentuate all the benefits you bring as the incumbent supplier – don't leave it up to the customer to recall these positives...don't assume they've even recognised them.

So all-in-all, the session was well worthwhile as a reminder of the importance of treating re-bids with the same - if not more - courtesy, care, attention, dedication and desire as a new bid.

And while I was by no means in any rush to leave the event, it would be dishonest if I don't end with the confession that I did enjoy a James Bond\* style departure, watching that beautiful building enticingly re-enveloped by the trees as it rapidly distanced in my rear-view mirror.

\* even though I don't drive a convertible. Or an Aston Martin. Oh, and I'm a girl.

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*Vanessa Britt is a freelance proposal writer. She would like to point out that this review has been written in a tone and style not necessarily representative of her typical proposal content. But with a background as a copywriter in marketing and advertising agencies prior to a career writing winning bids and tenders, she just couldn't help herself.*