

The Beauty of the Proposal

by *Thorne*

21 August 2009

First impressions can be so important, and attorneys know it. That's why they take such care of their appearance before an important meeting, like when they're getting ready to meet an attractive, potential client.

For all the care most attorneys put into how they appear *in person*, few put such care into how they appear *in print*. It's something of an occupational trait, like the illegible handwriting doctors use to write prescriptions.

Since most attorneys spend most of their time with legal matter, how they look in print just isn't important. I mean, it's not important to them. For most attorneys, "if a proposal looks like legal matter, that's just fine."

But that's not so. First impressions can be quite potent, whether they're delivered *in print* or *in person*.

Suppose an attractive client sends an RFP to a half-dozen firms. Five of the firms respond with proposals that look much alike — they look like legal memoranda. Their contents might differ quite a bit, but the first impression one gets is this: *they're all the same*.

The same, that is, except for the proposal from the firm that has a skilled designer, someone to make sure the firm looks sharp, *in print* and *on line*.

That proposal stands out. It makes the best first impression, and it does it by design. It enters the competition with an edge.

If you doubt me, at least consider what Peter Darling (a business-development consultant to law firms and someone who's worked on more proposals "than I care to remember") says in his article *How to Prepare a Proposal*:

Someone reading a proposal basically has two concerns. The first is, "Can/will they do what they say they can/will?" The second is, of course, "How much will it cost?" A great deal of this isn't a logical conclusion, but the result of fast, intuitive evaluation. Or, to put it in English, *someone reading your proposal will form a powerful impression of you, your company and your offering just based on how the damn thing looks*.

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The most important element of a proposal is the substance of it — what’s going to be done and what it’s going to cost. But how that substance is presented can be critical to the proposal’s success.

Here’s why. Before interested readers get to the substance of a proposal, they see it; and that has a potent affect on their first impression of it.

If they see a proposal that looks like it uses far too many words to deliver far too little content, they’re discouraged, and that’s because they’re busy: they’ve already got too much to do.

If they’re presented with five proposals that look like hard labor, and one that looks like an easy read, they’ll go for the easy read first, especially if they’re procurement officers rather than other lawyers.

Consider this when you prepare your next proposal, or your next presentation:

We’re prone to a way of evaluating things that is fast acting, and stubbornly resistant to change. It’s called *thin slicing*, and it’s how we come to like or dislike something — a person’s face, a painting, a phrase of music — in just a thin slice of time, like the blink of an eye.

It’s why first impressions can be so powerful and persistent, so difficult or impossible to change. And it’s why attorneys should make the best impression they can, whether they appear *in person* or *in print*.

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