

Engaging A Mentor To Shape A Winning Bid

By Robyn Haydon

Engaging a mentor to guide you through an important bid could be the difference between success and disappointment. Here are a few of the ways that a mentor can help you target your time where it will give you the best chance of success; win well, and avoid giving away margin to “buy” the business; and get your whole team working together to build a compelling proposal.



About the Author

Robyn is a business development consultant whose customers have won hundreds of millions of dollars worth of business with some of Australia’s largest corporate and government buyers. She specialises in helping people to navigate the treacherous waters of the competitive bidding and tendering system.

Since 2001 Robyn has worked on high-stakes bids and competitive tenders with more than 150 organisations in highly competitive industries including human services, technical and professional services, and complex commercial services such as ICT and infrastructure. She is the author of three books on business development, including bestseller *The Shredder Test – a step-by-step guide to writing winning proposals*.

“Robyn has worked with Skybridge on bids and tender responses since 2008, during which time we have won contracts worth in excess of \$100m. The first bid - and first win - was the Optus commercial contract, which we still hold today. In fact, of the 14 bids Robyn has worked on with us, 10 were won. This has positioned us strongly with large commercial and government customers including the National Broadband Network, Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Optus and Telstra. Skybridge has a national presence and competes against much larger organisations. Over the last 5 years Skybridge has almost doubled its revenue base, from a business of 25 staff turning over \$33m a year to a business of 150 staff (and more than 400 contractors) turning over \$62m a year. 98% of our revenue can be attributed to business we have won through formal submissions and competitive tenders, including many we have won with Robyn’s help. She is a valuable part of our team and our success.” **Michael Abela, CEO Skybridge**

Hugh Grant is one of Britain's best-known actors, famous for his roles in *Notting Hill*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Love Actually*.

Over his 30-plus year career, Grant has received a Golden Globe, a BAFTA, and an Honorary César award for his work and his films have earned more than US\$2.4 billion from 25 theatrical releases worldwide.

In a famous scene in *Love Actually*, where Grant played the British Prime Minister, he does a victory dance around No. 10 Downing Street to the Pointer Sisters' disco hit "Jump", after delivering a very public dressing-down to the sleazy American President (played by Billy Bob Thornton).

In this role, as in many others, Grant is the epitome of charm and confidence.

But behind this façade Hugh Grant was hiding a crippling secret. Recently it emerged that at the height of his fame, he suffered with stage fright so bad that it forced him to quit acting.

In late 2016, in an interview with the Hollywood Reporter, Grant revealed that the mammoth worldwide success of his 1999 film *Notting Hill*, he found himself getting "absurd stage fright attacks" with alarming frequency.

"I really don't know where it suddenly came from," he said. "They would just hit me in the middle of a film and they would only last a morning or something, but it was devastating.

"It would be some very simple scene, you'd rehearsed it perfectly, maybe shot the other guy's close-up, they turned around on you, you'd walk in there whistling and then suddenly, out of nowhere, you've got sweat shooting from your armpits and you can't remember your lines. These were terrible and embarrassing occasions. You could almost never use the scene, you had to cut it from the film."

Filled with "dread", Grant decided to quietly retire from acting, and for ten years his big-screen roles were limited to small, supporting parts until his 2016 return to leading-man status alongside Meryl Streep in *Florence Foster Jenkins*.

Stage fright, or performance anxiety, is a pervasive problem for people in leadership roles and in the public eye.

Other famous sufferers include Barbra Streisand, Lawrence Olivier, Greg Norman, Mahatma Gandhi and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

Psychologists have identified that performance anxiety stems from three main sources:

- The *task*, when it's much more challenging than what we are used to;
- The *situation*, when the performance conditions are unfamiliar and intimidating; and
- The *person* - our attitudes, beliefs and thought patterns related to the task and situation.

According to Psychology Today's research on performance anxiety, the combination of these factors leads to "*catastrophising*" – persistent, overblown feelings of gloom and potential disaster.

An article in Cognitive Therapy and Research Journal¹ found that performance anxiety is highly associated with the following personality traits:

1. Perfectionism,
2. An ongoing desire for personal control,
3. Fear of failure *and* success,
4. An intense anxiety about not being able to perform properly when the time comes (which can often serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy), and
5. Placing a high value on being liked and regarded with high esteem.

As a leader in business, performance anxiety can happen to you. Leaders have several traits in common with actors, world leaders and others in the public eye; you're great at what you do, have already seen some success, and there is pressure on you to deliver the next installment.

In business, we tend to associate performance anxiety with making a presentation or pitch in person. As a result, we devote a lot of effort to presentation training, coaching, and roleplaying before a major presentation.

But a proposal is still a performance – and one that can't be taken back after you have given it.

I have made a living as an independent proposal consultant since 2001. During that time I have helped people to win hundreds of millions of dollars of new business through proposals, bids and tenders – from small one-person companies to huge multinationals.

When someone first comes to talk to me about an important pitch or proposal that's on their radar, they are happy to acknowledge that it will be competitive.

They are also acutely aware that they've got only one shot at winning the business. That might be one shot for all time, if it's a one-off purchase like a construction project, or one shot for the next 3, 5 or more years if it's a contract for services that will end up getting locked down by an incumbent.

¹ Mor, S., Day, H.I., Flett, G.L. et al. Cogn Ther Res (1995) 19: 207. doi:10.1007/ BF02229695

Not surprisingly, most are looking for help because they want to give it their *best* shot, and they don't want to feel like they have left anything on the table.

What they are often reluctant to admit, but know is an issue, is that it's very easy to get stuck in our own "echo chamber" when we are putting together an important pitch; doing things and saying things we've always done.

And that what we've always done may not be enough to win the business.

When a goal is important to you, it's useful to have a mentor – an independent, experienced advisor who has walked the path you want to walk, and can help you find the path to success.

Engaging a mentor can help you get faster and better results than you could on your own. For example, a study by MicroMentor.org, a support service for start-up businesses, found that those who received mentoring increased their revenue by almost 10 times as much as those that did not.

Engaging a mentor is a proven way to navigate through an uncomfortable task and situation, particularly where you will need to need to manage the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of your team.

An important pitch, proposal, competitive tender or bid is an example of exactly such a situation.

Imagine for a minute that it's a few weeks after you have submitted your proposal. It's sitting there on your buyer's desk, amidst a stack of other proposals that they have just ranked in preference order. The preference order works something like the following diagram. On the left, is how the buyer rated the *proposal* (compelling, convincing, competent, unclear or unappealing); in the middle, what your proposal's *focus* is on when you're at this level (leverage, strategy, evidence presentation or message); and on the right, whether it *wins* (from always to never).

	PROPOSAL	FOCUS	WINS
5	Compelling	Leverage	Always
4	Convincing	Strategy	Often
3	Competent	Evidence	Sometimes
2	Unclear	Presentation	Rarely
1	Unappealing	Message	Never

Clearly you want to be sitting somewhere near the top when you want to win, but to explain this further, let's start from the bottom.

On the bottom, at level 1, sit the proposals that are the most **unappealing**. Here, the problem is the *message* – they just aren't buying what those guys are selling. (Hopefully, you aren't one of them).

Above this at level 2 are the proposals the buyer found **unclear**; they didn't quite "get it". A mentor can make sure you're not in this position by advising you on your *presentation*: the way your message is conveyed, both visually and in narrative.

Where things start getting better is at level 3. Above the line are the level 3 proposals that the buyer rates as **competent**. While the message and presentation are okay, these proposals are often lacking in *evidence* to support the claims the supplier is making.

In a competitive bid or tender, evidence is exceptionally important – evaluation panels have to give you a score, and the key element that sets apart the high-ranking proposals (scoring 8 or 10) and those that rank lower is the evidence you provide to substantiate your claims. A mentor will make sure that your team understands, and delivers on the evidence you'll need.

Where you want to be to achieve the most secure position is at levels 4 and 5.

Level 4 proposals are **convincing**, and show a level of insight that others don't. A mentor should be able to work with you and your team to develop the commercial *strategy* that sits behind each proposal – the key reasons why the customer should choose you, based on what the customer most wants; what you can best deliver; and what positions you best against competitors.

So instead of having to juggle presentation, evidence and the articulation of the pitch strategy, this leaves you free to focus at the highest level to identify *leverage* points that will make your offer so **compelling** that buyers simply can't say no to you.

A Lever 5 proposal is what will shift the competition onto a path that competitors simply can't follow – and a mentor can help you to achieve this too.

Over almost 20 years, I've helped my clients to win hundreds of millions of dollars worth of new business by helping them to build compelling proposals.

Although much of my work is subject to confidentiality agreements, and specific client projects can't be mentioned publicly by name, these are some typical examples:

- A national field service logistics provider went from small challenger to major industry player, winning more than a dozen major contracts with government and private sector customers, and **tripling its revenue won through competitive tenders to \$100m**.

- A manufacturer retained two of its biggest retail customers in a hotly-contested tender and netted a massive **\$63 million in extra business**.
- A regional water infrastructure firm **won its first \$30 million contract** – a project ten times larger than any it had bid for in the past.
- An apprenticeships services provider, previously incumbent only in one regional area of Australia, **quadrupled its revenue** within a tender seeking service system reform and **extended its reach across three entire States**.
- A justice sector provider **won \$12m over the course of a year**, winning four out of five bids submitted and growing existing business as well as winning new service delivery contracts.
- A distribution company won back a strategically important customer it had lost, **securing \$20 million in revenue**.
- A consortium **won \$10m in highly competitive government contracts**, including the first new money granted to their sector for more than 10 years.
- A national professional services firm landed **its first-ever lead supplier agreement** with one of Australia's biggest government departments against more polished, better resourced and more aggressive competitors.

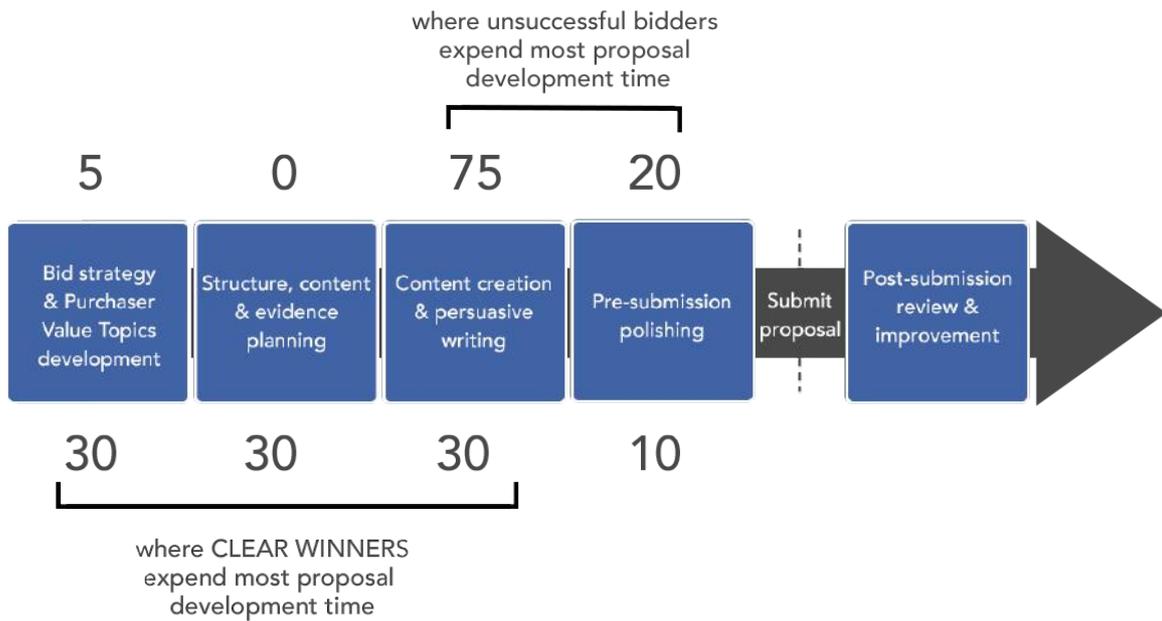
Making a written pitch, tender or proposal can be a block and a barrier between you, and the work you deserve to win.

There's a lot at stake, and not a lot of time, and buyers don't always give good instructions.

Like a sports coach, I will show your team how to win. I'll turn their anxiety into motivation by quickly identifying the value in what you can offer, and how to present it for greatest impact.

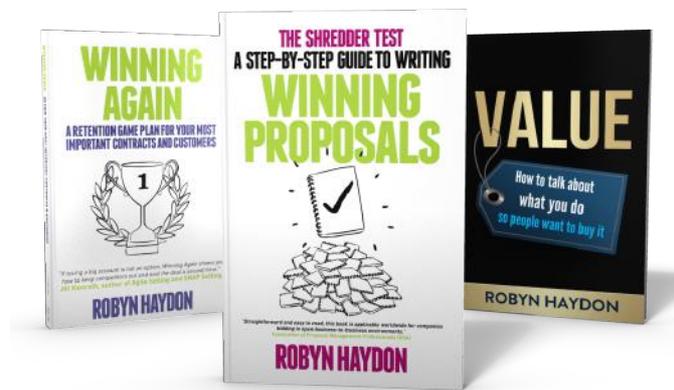
You'll get expert help to navigate through the complexities of the tendering world, target your time where it will give you the best chance of success, and win well, without giving away margin to "buy" the business.

It all starts by targeting your time and energy where it will give you the best chance of success:



My proposal strategy process is fast, engaging, tried and proven – and your team will love working with me.

To arrange a meeting to talk about how I can help you to win an important bid, tender, pitch or proposal that’s in your future, contact me on 0407 833 904 or email robyn@robynhaydon.com



More client testimonials:

"Job Futures was one of 5 multi-State providers to win Access business, one of 12 nationally. We increased our business level by over 30% in the context of a very competitive tender. Thank you very much for your work with us and, in particular, your clarity of thinking and guidance in relation to the bid strategy. I am very pleased with this outcome." **Lisa Fowkes, Chief Executive, Job Futures**

"THANK YOU for your input on our recent BHP Billiton proposal. The client accepted the proposal as it stood i.e. no need for any amendments, not even commercial negotiations! His words were something along the lines of "the proposal, its scope, approach, methodology and pricing are spot on - no changes required." Your input went a long way to us delivering a cogent, quality proposal - my sincere thanks." **Keri Eruera, Chief Executive Officer, Opticon Australia**

"PMP contracted Robyn Haydon three years ago. In that time we have not lost a tender that she has been involved in. In fact the last two retail tenders Robyn has managed for us delivered total revenue of \$240 million over 3 years, increasing our share of the customer wallet by 39% or \$63 million. PMP is now renowned for the look, feel and professionalism of our tenders and I certainly wouldn't like our competitors to use her!" **Andrew Williams, Director of Print and Premedia Sales - PMP Limited**

"In delivering a powerful bid or proposal from within your business, there are constant challenges to establish the strongest possible outcome. Through engaging Robyn Haydon, we were able to lean on a mature, commercially astute resource to guide and coach our business leaders and subject matter experts. Sounds reasonably straightforward, but nothing is further from the truth. Robyn's work requires a combination of clear strategic thought, balancing the viewpoint of the 'client' and the 'customer', and a unique quality to facilitate through multiple layers of the business, driving outcomes and ensuring accountability. With all these plates spinning and a deadline looming, Robyn maintained a personable approach and kept the 'fun' in the game for us. Her unique range of skills makes her a valuable resource." **David Ryan, Sales & Marketing Director SIRVA - Asia Pacific**