



# The request for proposal process: A brief overview for trainee medical writers

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## Abstract

This article gives an overview of the request for proposal (RFP) process, which can often be challenging for those new to medical communications. Four key areas are outlined: understanding the RFP process, teamwork, the pitch process, and seeking feedback. For each area, advice and recommendations are provided with a view to helping, in particular, those who have to engage in business development activities for the first time.

## Introduction

Responding to a request for proposal (RFP) is a critical function of working within medical communications, but can be a new and sometimes daunting area for trainee medical writers. Indeed, as medical communications agencies become increasingly meritocratic, trainee writers may be increasingly called upon to engage in the business development process. Whilst new to medical communications, these writers will tend to have scientific expertise and experience in relevant therapy areas, which is attractive to both their agency and pharmaceutical companies (referred to as the client, hereafter). Below, I outline some key areas which will be of particular help to trainee writers.

## Understanding the RFP process

Broadly, the RFP process is a form of bidding whereby the client will invite submissions from potential vendors (e.g. medical communications agencies) relating to undertaking a piece of business. Upon submission of their proposal, agencies will then usually be called to 'pitch' for the business (readers familiar with the BBC's *Dragons' Den* take note). However, proposals can also be sent electronically (e.g. as slide decks) or be conducted over the telephone.

If you are asked by your agency to engage in the RFP process, it is likely to mean that you will have relevant experience in the therapy area in question. For example, a trainee writer asked to help submit a bid for publication planning work involving a new cardiovascular drug may have a PhD in cardiac physiology. This type of academic experience will undoubtedly help you understand the scope and background of the RFP and puts you in an excellent position to add value to your agency's response. It is important for you to read the RFP documentation and fully understand the needs of the audience. For example, it is unlikely the client will want a full explanation of the pharmacokinetics of a compound which they have themselves spent much time and money developing. Instead, companies may place higher emphasis on the creativity and innovation that partnership with your medical communications agency (*ergo* you) can offer them. In this context, 'thinking outside of the box' can sometimes be the difference between success and failure.

## Teamwork

As with most lines of work, we do not work in isolation in medical communications but instead we interact with and learn from our

colleagues. In most medical communications agencies, trainee writers will be engaged with senior writers on a daily basis and this foundation of strong teamwork is critical to the RFP process. For example, it may be that senior medical writers have worked with the client in question and can advise you on what to expect; they are likely to have been involved in business development before and are valuable sources of information and education for the trainee writer. Moreover, when working on an RFP you may find yourself engaged with colleagues whom you do not work with on a daily basis, and this is a crucial opportunity to cultivate good working relationships outside your day-to-day realm. This is especially pertinent for trainee writers in larger agencies, which, for example, may have specialist creative and market research departments that are called upon during the RFP process. As a new medical writer, viewing the mechanics of how these different business functions interact to win new business can be especially illuminating.

## The pitch

Trainee writers asked to take part in the pitch process for the first time will probably experience a mix of emotions, including pride and fear. It is important for you to understand your role in the pitch and to highlight anything you feel uncomfortable with immediately – it is not advantageous for either you or your agency for you to be uncomfortable in the pitch, as this will come across to the client and will be deleterious to your chances of successfully winning the business. In this context, more experienced

members of your team will be able to guide you with regard to the practicalities of undertaking a pitch and the best way of presenting your proposal. However, it is highly likely you will have been asked to participate due to your experience in the therapy area, and this should always be remembered. Indeed, clients will often see you as the therapy area ‘expert’ and a new writer’s confidence during the pitch should be bolstered by this.

Whilst the pitch should be concerned with addressing the project brief, it is also an opportunity for both you and the client to meet each other and gain a nascent understanding of how your personalities may/may not work together. In this context, it is important for trainee writers to remain relaxed and friendly, and not get bogged down in the scientific and technical information that is being presented. Indeed, trainee writers may be surprised about how much winning new business is about personality, and not necessarily level of complex scientific knowledge or technical prowess with Microsoft PowerPoint.

## Seek feedback

When we are awarded business, all is well and we should rightly feel proud of our contributions. Next begins the process of actually beginning the project you have been so desperate to win, and this comes with its own set of challenges that includes cultivating a strong working relationship with the client. In cases where you and your agency have been unsuccessful, it is important not to take this too personally – although it can

be understandably disappointing when you have invested time and effort in the RFP process. For trainee writers involved in the RFP process for the first time, this will have been a fantastic learning experience; you will improve your standing in your agency and have many positives that you can take forward into your medical writing career. If possible, you should always seek feedback regarding the decision of the client – objective appraisals oftentimes being different from our own self-perceptions of performance.<sup>1</sup> Over time, you will notice trends in the attributes of successful vendors and this will allow extremely important insight into the procurement ethos of different clients. This feedback will help during the next RFP process that you are engaged in and, ultimately, allow you to develop and grow along your journey in the fascinating world of medical writing.

## References

1. John OP, Robins RW. Accuracy and bias in self-perception: individual differences in self-enhancement and the role of narcissism. *Journal of personality and social psychology*. 1994;66(1):206-19.

## Author information

Liam Gillies, PhD has been a medical writer at Watermeadow Medical (Ashfield Healthcare Communications) since May 2015.

## Brevity is the soul of wit

What can you say in 140 characters? Shakespeare was right, indeed a lot. It turns out the so-called micro-blogging service Twitter is an ideal medium to share information through publicly visible links and images. Depending on who you follow your Twitter can be an incredibly individualised source of news. When looking for specific information, hashtags such as #clinicaltrials or #medcomms allow you to filter efficiently from the 65 million daily tweets in the network.

Since November 2010, the EMWA Social Media Team has been providing a selection of interesting medical writing-related news, courses and events and, of course, informing about EMWA activities such as conferences and webinars. And let us not forget that Twitter allows for plenty

of interaction between members and non-members. If you have suggestions or criticism, want us to tweet anything special or ask us a question, let us know in a message to @Official\_EMWA

or to our Public Relations Officer Beatrix Doerr (pr@emwa.org).

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