

Building effective client proposals

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How should you pitch to business leaders?

This is a particular topic of interest for me. I have spent over 25 years working for IBM advising clients on business transformation strategies, and effective communication - deciding what to say and how to say it - is something I regularly have to think about. And as a teaching associate at Warwick Business School, I am keen to help build these skills in the next generation of business practitioners.

One particular subject that has interested me at the School has been consulting. I have been involved with consultancy courses at WBS for three years now, most commonly as a 'client' in group exercises representing IBM. Student groups are asked to research and then present a transformational business strategy proposal, in response to a business opportunity that is described up front.

I'd like to think that these exercises are enjoyable and insightful for students. They are designed to provide a condensed experience of a realistic consultancy exchange and are a good way of bringing together many of the disciplines that employers are requesting from their hires, such as critical analysis, empathy, and presentation skills. One of the exercises' aims is to help students learn the art of business communication and make them more effective influencers in the workplace, whether that's as an employee or external adviser.

So, what are we looking for in these exercises? In a real-world scenario, consultants are brought in for a broad range of reasons, and different clients can have differing expectations and requirements. But for this blog post I'm going to describe some

general pointers of what makes an effective initial business proposal, and some techniques on how to formulate and deliver it.

Let's break the task down into four stages: research, formulation, development, and delivery.

Research

In the research phase, you need to gain a sufficient grounding on the problem being solved and the business context that underpins it.

The first step is to **understand the client and their requirement**. This is important, as any small misunderstanding can set you down the wrong path, with the risk of errors compounding by the time you explain your final proposal. Your research should start by looking up the client (both the person and the company) on the internet.

The requirement can come to you in many forms. Many clients issue a document, often called something like Request for Information (RFI) or Request for Proposal (RFP), to prospective vendors to ensure that all candidates have access to similar information. Often responses are requested in a common format to allow decision makers to compare proposals more easily; this unfortunately does allow for less creative flair from the consultant!

Regardless of how you get the requirement and the form it takes, read it carefully to understand the precise ask; don't guess or extrapolate, and instead note down anything you're unsure of for subsequent clarification. It's also a good idea to continually revisit the requirement at key points during the proposal development process to ensure that the ask is still being met; a perfect proposal to a non-existent problem will be of no use to the client.

After learning about the client's requirement, you might have the opportunity to ask questions of them at an initial meeting, although you may equally well be on your own until the proposal is presented. Consultants rarely have the luxury of continual client access, so be sure to use any time you do have to resolve any doubts; **be inquisitive** but don't waste time asking about things that you can find out from public sources (such as their competitors). Bear in mind that the client might be naturally protective (or dismissive!) of their business and so be on the lookout for bias in any discussion.

In addition to any clarifications you identified earlier, good questions to ask of the client include ones related to their work-related incentives, but also questions around the dynamics of their organisation and any internal politics they are willing to share. How does the local team fit with their wider business strategy? Who are the influencers and who are the decision makers? This is important because you might be able to get access to others in the company even if you can't get continual access to the primary decision maker.

Your sources of information for this phase will start with **company reports** and their **external messaging** (e.g. web site). These can give you useful information on the markets and strategy because any proposal you come up with will need to fit into a wider company direction, but again beware of bias. Doing similar research on the client's **competitors** will also help - what are others in the same industry doing? Particularly, understanding the strategy of more successful competitors often resonates well; and if your client they are already an industry leader, who are the challengers that are poised to disrupt, and what are they doing? (There's a lot of established research behind this - check out Prospect Theory [1] for more details.)

A good source of competitive information lies with **analyst reports** from companies such as Gartner, Forrester, and IDC. These are good because they typically give a more dispassionate review of the client's industry and insight into future trends. Again, these are not immune from bias, so if you can correlate trends from reports from multiple analysts, this will strengthen any future proposal.

In Higher Education we are easily drawn to **academic research** as robust sources of information but is unlikely to form the sole backbone of many client proposals. When combined with other data sources, they can form a compelling justification for particular a course of action, but a proposal based purely on academic theory is likely to be perceived as untested in the field, and adoption therefore a scary prospect, despite many clients' stated desires for innovation.

Formulation

In this stage, you will need come up with ideas that solve the client's stated requirements, and work towards elaborating them in a form with the aim of deriving a proposal that will be compelling.

Using a process of **Design Thinking** [2] can be very effective at developing ideas that focus on the pain points of the client and their solutions. A good initial first step is to hold a group brainstorming session where possible ideas are debated. At this stage the focus should be on quantity, not quality: individually jot multiple ideas down on sticky notes, arrange them on a graph that pitches feasibility against importance, and vote on the candidates: you should be looking to agree on just one or two ideas that are both feasible and of high importance. Don't be tempted to select more than this number of ideas to take forward; you won't be able to go into sufficient depth during your presentation and it might come across to the client that you're hedging your ideas.

Once you've selected your one or two ideas, the group needs to next reach a common understanding, and then successively refine it. In Design Thinking this is often done using a series of playbacks, where smaller groups decide upon an aspect of the idea (often using personas) and then explain them back to the group. Start with the high-level concept: Can you explain it in 30 seconds (the elevator pitch)? Can you explain it to a five-year-old? (The best ideas are often the simplest; if you can't explain your idea to a child, what hope you have of explaining it to a business executive?!)

Nailing the high-level concept needs to be complemented by the details. Keep refining the idea and adding details to ultimately ensure that you have the answers to any questions that might arise. The point around playbacks is to allow for ideas to evolve and grow. It's important, particularly for the person who originally wrote down the idea, to be flexible and allow the group to polish the idea, while at the same time avoiding design-by-committee (trying to please everyone and ending up pleasing no-one). Again, keep referring to the client's requirement if you are unsure.

What details are you looking for? Here are the essentials:

- **Benefits:** Think about each of the stakeholders, and what's in it for them. Persona analysis, again from Design Thinking, can help identify these. A client will probably be focussed on business success (increased revenue/market share, reduced cost/risk), but also consider the effect the idea will have on others: the client's customers, business partners, competitors, industry, and wider society. Focus on the decision makers' requirements and incentives, and those of their company, and ensure that everything you're suggesting aligns. Think why they need to act *now*, and why they need to choose *you* as a consultant.

- **Success Criteria:** These are closely aligned to the benefits, but specifically answering the question: what does success look like? How will the client know if the idea has worked? Think about SMART targets: specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time related. However, be careful when dealing with financials. While \$/£ value is a tempting target that is both specific and measurable, it will only work if there are calculations to back up your numbers; don't guess. Particularly for a student exercise, I would avoid going into numbers unless you're explicitly asked to do so (for example, on an accountancy module).
- **Costs:** The flip side of benefits, what are the costs associated with the idea? Think about the actions that are going to require significant investment (e.g. product development costs, sales enablement, consultancy fees). Again, for student exercises you might want to avoid discussion on financials, and (unless you're sure) any opportunity costs pursuant to the client's existing businesses (i.e., what they would be *not* doing if they implemented your idea).
- **Risks:** What are the risks associated with your idea? What do you not yet know, and what external or internal forces could affect your idea's success? There are lots of ways of modelling and describing these [4], but make sure that you do. As a consultant, it's tempting to present your idea as a no-brainer and therefore underplay the risks, but don't do this... really. There are *always* trade-offs (without exception!) and being anything less than totally honest about what these are will just show that you haven't thought about the problem sufficiently. It can also make any presentation come across as a sales pitch, which can be off-putting to the client; it can make it seem like you're only after their business, and don't have their best interests at heart.
- **Alternatives:** Closely related to risks - what other ways are there of solving the problem? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Again, be honest about these. What can often work well is presenting two alternative approaches to a client. While this can show that you've thought about the issue from multiple angles, always provide a recommended course of action - this is why the client is engaging your services, after all.
- **Ethics & Sustainability:** What are the ethical concerns (or benefits) associated with the idea? Does it align with sustainable practice? Most companies have an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) policy - take the time to find out about this to ensure that what you're saying is compatible.
- **Implementation guidance:** Think about how the idea could be implemented. A detailed plan won't be required at this stage, but understanding how the client could realistically get from their current situation ("as-is") to the new one ("to-be") shows an understanding of the practical aspects of making things happen, i.e. that you're not just "blue-sky thinking". In addition to the specific steps that

would make the idea work, think about appropriate leadership styles [3] that will allow the stakeholders to sell the idea to their employees, and how they can navigate any ethical concerns: what might a bad headline look like?

Development

In this next stage you need to come up with a way to present your developed ideas to the client. In our student exercises this typically means coming up with a presentation, so that's what I will focus on here, but it can commonly also mean the production of a board paper, formal report, or some other documentation.

Let's first consider the presentation and its structure, content, and style. There is a lot of good practice when it comes to presentation skills that I don't have time to go into here. But most importantly, consider the time you have available to present, including how long you want to leave for questions, and plan the number of charts and the detail you can go into accordingly. The exact number of slides depends on the type of content being presented and how fast you speak, but I typically allow around three minutes per slide; time tends to go faster than you think!

In terms of structure, I find the following works well regardless of the ideas you are pitching:

- Start with a brief **introduction** to yourself and your company (if necessary). You're trying to answer the question "why should the client listen to you", but once you've established credibility move on - don't go overboard on this; don't make it sound like you're trying too hard.
- This is followed by a **brief summary** of your takeaway point. Don't be tempted to leave your conclusion to a big "Tada" moment at the end. Effective presentations are rarely narrative like a book: they are more like triangles! Say the important bits (the top of the triangle) first, and then drill to successive levels of detail as you go through.
- At this point you need to develop the argument that is going to lead to the introduction of your idea. Start by playing back the **client's requirement**, to show that you've understood the context. Embrace storytelling rather than relying solely on facts and data but be prepared to back up your arguments.
- Then describe the **business background**: the relevant research from earlier, including the competitive background.

- Succinctly describe **your basic idea**, and then elaborate with each of the details you considered in your previous section. This is probably the bulk of your presentation.
- Conclude with a **summary** of what you've covered and leave the client with a **call-to-action** (what you want the next steps to be), with the opportunity to ask questions.

For each slide, the adage is true that “**less is more**”. It's tempting to cram lots of data into charts to prove you've done their homework (particularly if you have limited time), but this can lead to crowded charts. These are bad because they make it difficult for the audience to know where to look, and they end up skimming the visuals rather than listening to the speaker. A good rule is no more than five bullet points per chart, and a font size of no less than 14pt. Each bullet point should be an aide-memoire for the speaker, and not an essay; try and keep each point to a single line.

It's also important to adopt a **consistent style** for your slides; this is a particularly common problem in group exercises where different authors write different sections. Aim for a single style: one font in a consistent colour, size and spacing, and a judicious use of colour and emphasis throughout. Use the client's template and styling if you can, as this is a subtle way of showing your alignment to the client's values. Similarly, use their terminology and acronyms (e.g., if the client calls it “*GenAI*” rather than “*Generative AI*”, then that's what you should use).

With your slides prepared, if you're working in a team you will need to select who will speak. Having more than one speaker can be a good idea, as it helps keep things fresh, although for most presentations try to have **no more than two speakers**, because the process of handing over can get stilted. However, be sure that multiple people know the content in case of an unexpected absence. It's usually good practice to identify an additional person to take any notes (minutes) that might arise from the meeting, and to keep time.

Now the speakers need to **get familiar with the material**. Understand the logical structure of the presentation so that you can jump around as necessary and allow you to understand when to defer any questions that will be addressed later. For each slide, know what the key points are: the detail that is *not* written on the slides! Using speaker notes is a good idea, but don't write down what you're going to say word-for-word; a presenter that is reading from a script is rarely engaging. If you need the comfort of learning something verbatim, memorise just the first sentence or two of each slide; this should be sufficient to get you into your flow.

Delivery

Before your presentation, arrive early, **get familiar with the environment** you'll be working in and test out the technology. While a client will probably be sympathetic to any problems on a human level, it's unlikely to lead to a successful outcome for your business, so check: can your laptop connect to the projector? If you need network connectivity, does it work? If you're presenting over an unfamiliar video conferencing system, do you need to install anything, and do you know how to drive it (particularly, do you know how to share your screen)? Also remember to close any non-essential applications; having a presentation interrupted by unwanted notifications is off-putting for all (and potentially harmful to your reputation)!

Consider also the non-technical logistics. Do you have water to drink? Are you comfortable with the layout of the room? Where are you going to stand? How to position yourself is equally important for any non-speaking members of the team; having them stand awkwardly next to the presenter shuffling their feet is not a professional look.

Once you've met the client and engaged in small talk (possibly uncomfortable, but essential in establishing rapport), it's a good idea to frame the meeting - i.e., establish what is going to happen, to make sure that expectations are aligned for both the consultant and client. Having done this, hopefully the presentation can then begin.

If you're not a seasoned speaker, presenting can be a daunting experience, but it's important to identify ways of identifying stress and developing techniques to **control your nerves** that work for you. Firstly, be mindful of how you're talking. People tend to increase their speaking speed when nervous, so if in doubt, slow down! Similarly, keep an ear out for any verbal tics you might have ("So..." is a common one), as your brain will be tempted to insert these while you're thinking of what to say. Don't be afraid to get your colleagues to point these out to you while practicing, and you might also agree some subtle non-verbal nudges from your fellow teammates, to feed back if something's not right; this will give you a chance to correct before it's too late.

Similarly, be mindful of your hands: don't gesticulate wildly or put your hands in your pockets. And if you suspect you're nervous, don't hold anything as this will accentuate any shaking; instead, try keeping your thumb pressed firmly against your first finger; this can be an effective, imperceptible way of stopping the shakes.

When speaking, **make good use of PowerPoint** (if that's what you're using). If you end up in a protracted discussion that doesn't relate to your current slide, either blank the screen (the 'B' or 'W' button) or flip to a slide that *does* relate (type the page number directly if you know it; it's more professional than rapidly paging up and down). But bear in mind that it's your responsibility to keep the discussion on track, so don't be afraid to defer questions to move the discussion on. Use a nearby flip chart as a 'parking lot' to make a note of future discussion items; it shows that you're not going to dismiss or forget potentially important points.

Make a point of **reading the room**. If it becomes evident that a section of your presentation is not going to land, skip it. Far too many presenters insist on getting through their material even if it's established as being irrelevant to the needs of the audience. Think on your feet; this is where your time spent researching the topic pays off. Give ample opportunities for questions, remember to actively listen to what is being asked, and don't take any questions that are being asked as criticism: consider instead that the client is interested in what you have to say. Similarly, don't get defensive in your responses, and be respectful of the client's background, their business, and any prior decisions: as the saying goes, don't tell them that their baby's ugly!

At the end of your presentation, open the floor for any final questions, and ensure that the slide you end on shows your contact details and one or two key takeaway points. Thank the client for their time and ensure that everyone has agreed the next steps, and by when these steps will be done.

And... once the meeting is over, you will probably need some time to **decompress!** It's a good idea to regroup in your team for a coffee and to discuss how things went, so that you can replicate your successes and improve for the future. You should write a follow-up email for the client, again thanking them for their time and clarifying any discussion points and the agreed next steps. As a consultant team you also need to decide who is on-point for completing any action items, and you must ensure they are done in a timely fashion.

Summary

I hope this guide is useful to anyone preparing a client proposal, whether that's in a student setting or with a real client. As a summary, here are three pieces of advice I will leave you with:

- 1) Do your research! Knowing the problem space allows you to think on your feet more effectively.
- 2) Pick no more than two ideas to pitch to the client, which must be feasible, impactful, and relevant.
- 3) Aim for clarity in both your written and verbal presentation. Don't build crowded slides, and if you're nervous when presenting, slow down!

Further Reading

[1] Kahneman, D., 2011, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, ISBN 978-0-3742-7563-1

This is the famous book by Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman. There are lots of great psychological observations on how people work, including an expansion on his seminal work on Prospect Theory.

[2] Plattner, Hasso; Meinel, Christoph; Leifer, Larry J., eds. (2011). *Design thinking: understand, improve, apply. Understanding innovation*. Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, ISBN 978-3-6421-3756-3

There are lots of books, courses and approaches on Design Thinking, which presents a great toolbox of approaches for developing solutions to problems that users experience. This book introduces the Stanford University *d.school* approach, which is one of the most commonly used worldwide.

[3] Northouse, P. G., 2013, *Leadership Theory and Practice*. 6th ed. SAGE, ISBN 978-1-4522-0340-9

This is my favourite book on Leadership theory, as it introduces the various models in a consistent, easy-to-read style. When advising clients how to approach a particular situation, this will come in useful.

[4] Porter, M. E., 1979, *How Competitive Forces Shape Strategy*, Harvard Business Review, May 1979 (Vol. 57, No. 2), pp. 137–145.

Porter's Forces is a commonly taught and widely used theory for modelling the external factors that affect an organisation's success. This is a link to the original work; it's worth getting up to speed on this if you're not familiar.