

# "SELLING "BEST VALUE" IN THE NEW COMMERCIAL GOVERNMENT MARKET

Best-value contracting is eclipsing the traditional low-cost principles of competitive award, setting new standards for the preparation of winning proposals.

#### About the Author

**JOSEPH T. NOCERINO** is the chief executive officer of Century Planning Associates, a leading proposal development firm in the Washington, DC, Metro Area. He can be contacted at [joe.nocerino@centuryplanning.com](mailto:joe.nocerino@centuryplanning.com). Send comments about this article to [cm@ncmahq.org](mailto:cm@ncmahq.org).

BY JOSEPH T. NOCERINO

## CONCEPTUALLY MAPPED WALL DISPLAY

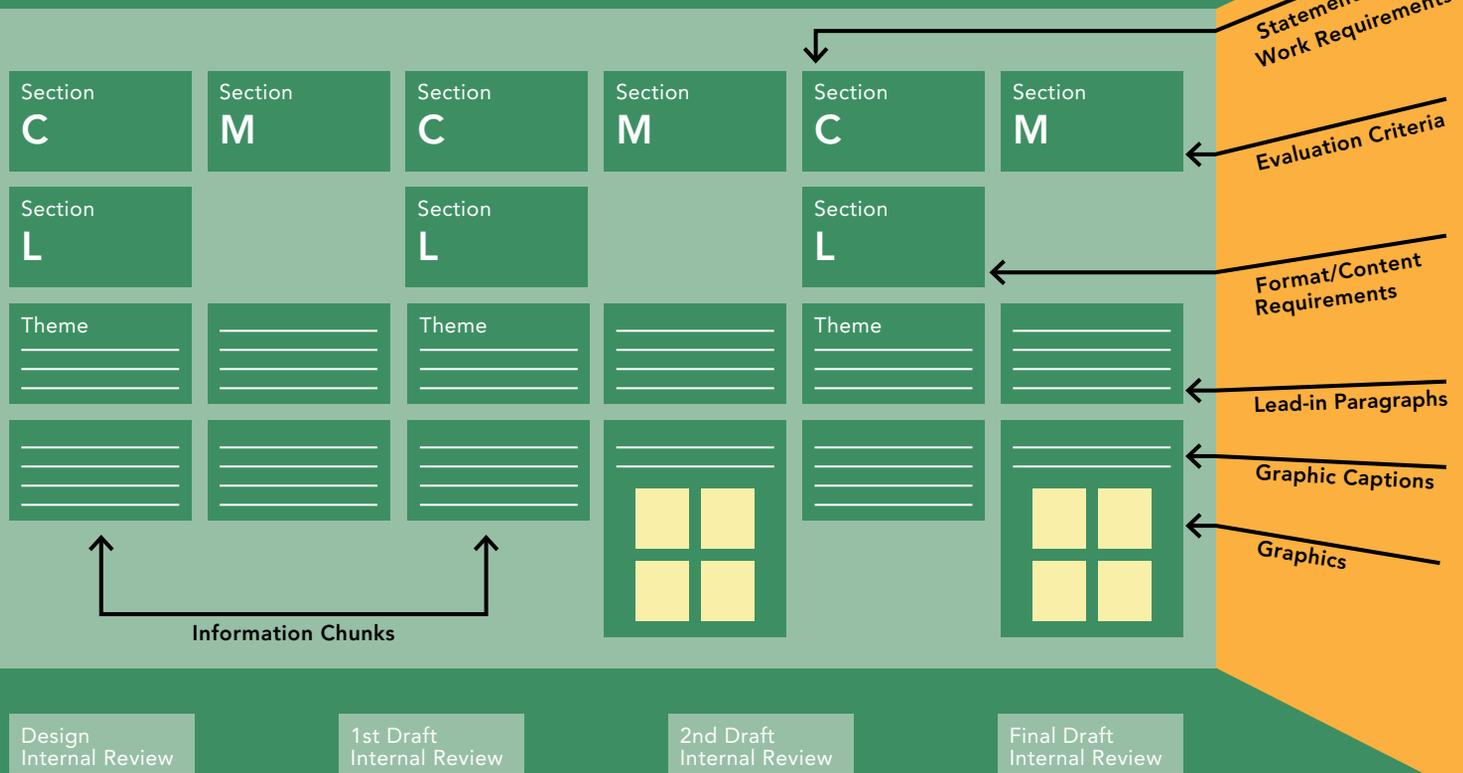


Figure 1.

*Conceptual mapping is an underlying tool for team development and the facilitation of an evolving solution and best-value-based, customer-centric, superior proposals.*

**OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS, I HAVE SUBMITTED THOUSANDS** of competitive proposals to state, local, and federal government agencies; both Department of Defense (DOD) and civilian; to organizations such as the U.S. Postal Service; and to large and small commercial firms. We all know that proposals are a costly activity, the major cost element being the cost of the team that will prepare the response.

In the 1960s, typed contracts were often awarded solely on the basis of lowest price, regardless of the fact that the presentation was subpar at best. In the 1970s, little changed in terms of quality, format, and content. Still, proposals that were marginally qualified and not fully responsive to and/or compliant with solicitation content managed to win contracts. Even with the advent of desktop publishing software, proposals during the 1980s and 1990s were still dull, painful to read through in their entirety, and lacking color and important design elements.

Today, there are 30 percent fewer federal procurements solicited per year. Requests for proposals (RFPs) are more complex, the competition steeper, proposal development costs higher, and the consequences of losing a bid, more significant. Second place is the first loser. The government has adopted a more commercial approach to awarding contracts. The focus is now on best value (which has become the norm), with "lowest price" becoming the anomaly.

The bar for success has been set much higher than at any other time in procurement history. Government contractors understand the need to partner with agencies and effectively communicate

and deliver best value. Creative writing, effective visual communications, and presentation design techniques typically associated with the commercial publishing and advertising world are standard practice in proposal development. To "get in the game" as marginal contenders, "good" proposals are sufficient enough only to qualify in terms of:

- Form,
- Format,
- Content,
- Readability,
- Technical subject matter competence, and
- Capability.

Much more is required to cross the finish line as the winner each and every time.

### Best Value and the Superior Competitive Proposal

*The company consistently awarded the procurement is the one that goes beyond what is sufficient and delivers more than just what is necessary.*

Basing awards on best value, although never formally stated, has long been a commercial industry practice. Perhaps the earliest organization to "set the standard for best value" was the U.S. Postal Service. Over time, many agencies have followed suit and also incorporated best value as an evaluation criterion. The *Federal Acquisition Regula-*

## SELLING BEST VALUE TO THREE TYPES OF REVIEWERS



Figure 2.

Funder review critical to contract award includes the "three-minute" first review, the "three-hour" second review, and the "three-minute" final review.

tion (FAR) broadly defines best value as a "reasonable and realistic basis" for attributes such as special features, past performance, efficiency considerations, warranties, technical competence, and team member expertise. The definition of best value also:

- Leaves a great deal of room for creativity and opportunity within a proposal submission,
- Establishes the concept of a partnering relationship between funder and contractor, and
- Encourages opportunity for creativity in the design of the cost/price proposal.

A superior competitive proposal employs the idea of best value strategically as a component of every proposal volume and section. Only a superior competitive proposal (SCP) will win consistently. An SCP regularly and routinely exceeds the minimum requirements for consideration. It requires selling best value cover to cover, across all volume submissions and nothing less. All proposals, when written to the specifications of the RFP, will at least meet the minimum standards of technical compliance, content, form, format, and readability. But who wants to be at the same level as everyone else? To break away from the pack, the playing field must be unlevelled. An SCP always anticipates and mitigates the fact that, regardless of the brilliance, compliance, and responsiveness of the technical response solution and price, one or more competitors might submit a lower bid and win.

To overcome this daunting possibility, a very simple mindset must be adopted: your proposal will win. Period. The confidence to accept this mind-set begins in the planning and creative process, or conceptual mapping. It thrives in a highly motivated proposal team that rewards best individual spirit and contribution from each member in an egoless approach. This winning ideology challenges the proposal team to communicate best value in both text and visualization, relentlessly selling best value from cover to cover as if there is no other alternative.

### Conceptual Mapping—The Origin of Best Value Messaging

Conceptual mapping provides the processes and procedures for developing a superior competitive proposal and the synergistic team essential for creation and construction.

The key to developing an SCP is to have a proposal development system. Unfortunately, this simple key toward success has been underused by organizations. Many times, these plans are unread or awaiting updates, collecting dust on an empty shelf in a storage room. Other plans are still yet to be formalized and recorded. The phrase "it's in our head, we know it" would never be upheld in a court of law, or for an exam or set of rules. Why is your organization any different?

A competitive corporation must focus on the establishment of a consistent corporate approach or system for competitive proposal preparation to be successful. The proposal system must

- Be fully documented;
- Work well within your corporate business culture and environment;
- Exist as a "living" and dynamic mode of operations, modifiable as appropriate;
- Be communicated to your proposal staff and all new members;
- Be followed by everyone on the team; and
- Be allowed time to become well established.

An effective proposal development system should help development teams avoid four common, ineffective approaches:

1. Writing and rewriting;
2. "Smokestack" development;
3. Integration of disparate writing; and
4. Cumbersome, onerous, and inflexible "story boards."

The most important ingredient for developing a competitive best-value proposal is the effective use of conceptual mapping. Conceptual mapping is a critical process, a material tool, and a crossroad in time when the key ingredients of your proposals are discovered, defined, and visualized for your proposal team, and ultimately, for the reviewers who will cast judgment. It is a mapping technique used to

- Stimulate and drive discussion,
- Capture and visually display information (e.g., win plan, proposal architecture, information voids, and graphics) on a flat surface (e.g., wall, glass) visible to all proposal team members,
- Organize information, and
- Produce a template for writing.

Effective conceptual mapping is the precursor for proposal decisions and development. It serves as an egoless collaborative approach to document creative ideas from each team member. It can be used for bid/no-bid decisions, clarifications, and rationale documentation. It is also vital throughout development to create

- A proposal architecture, derived from the RFP mapped decomposition;
- A cover and initial response design;

- The proposal team;
- A brainstorming environment to develop such items as best value:
  - Win themes,
  - Ghosts,
  - Discriminators, and
  - Creative solution(s) with customer-centric features and benefits;
- A detailed proposal architecture map for dynamic writing;
- An ongoing roadmap for initial writing, revisions, adjustments and review during draft and final writing, internal reviews, and final reproduction and packaging; and
- An architecture for verbal presentations.

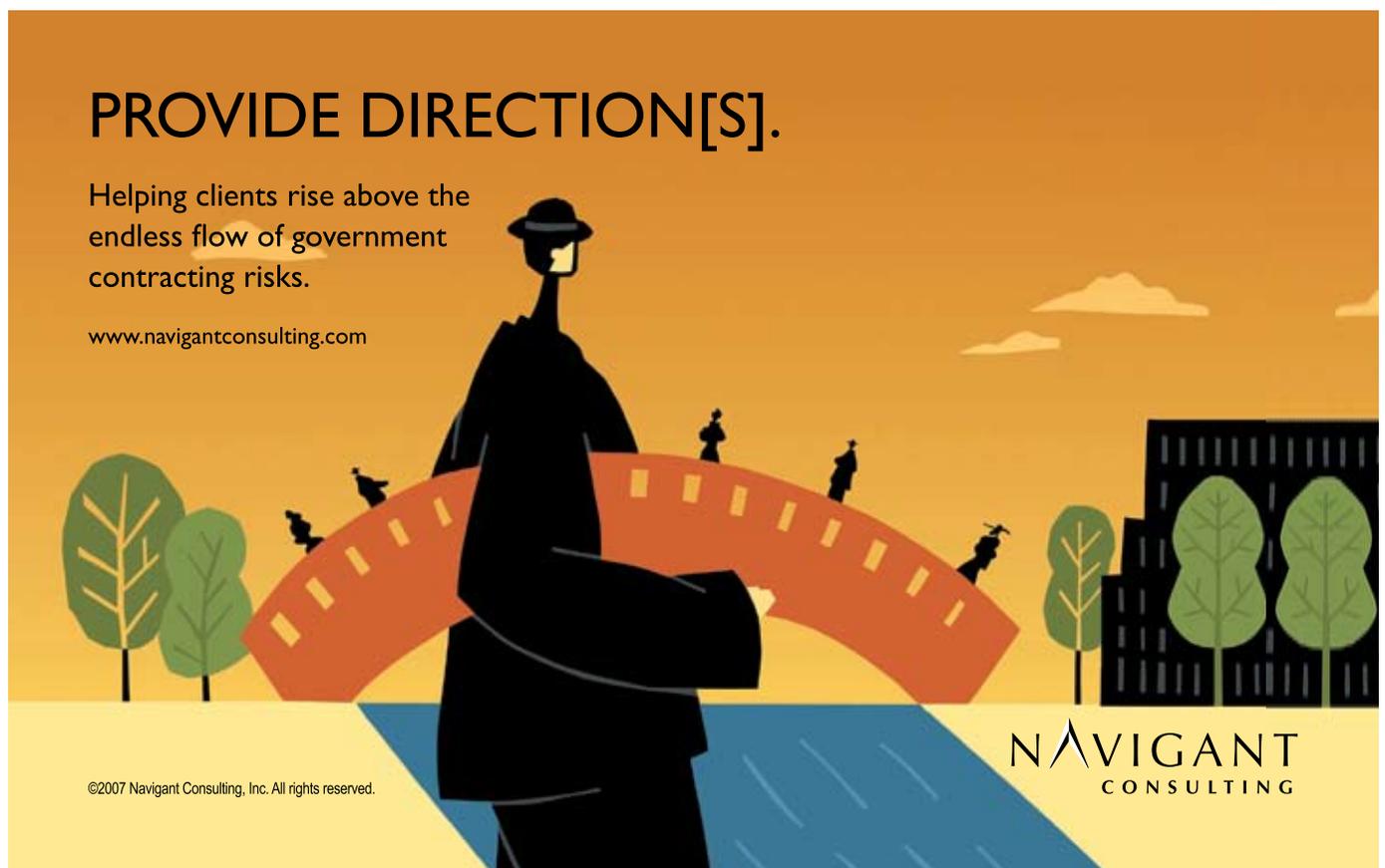
It is a tool used to visualize and clarify the SCP solution. Its purpose is to develop and document the best ideas and best value sell points in the form of "information chunks." Information chunks are key words, phrases, and incomplete sentences that contain sufficient information to act as springboards for the proposal team to develop during draft and final writing. Keeping ideas simple throughout the process allows more time to be spent on developing the concepts, not lost in confusing organizational issues.

The conceptual map is developed during the early stage of proposal development (See **Figure 1** on page 11). It reflects the infor-

## PROVIDE DIRECTION[S].

Helping clients rise above the endless flow of government contracting risks.

[www.navigantconsulting.com](http://www.navigantconsulting.com)



©2007 Navigant Consulting, Inc. All rights reserved.

NAVIGANT  
CONSULTING

## SAMPLE COVER



Example 1.

*Your first impression is a lasting impression, so start best-value selling with the proposal cover.*

mation chunks (words, phrases and, graphic ideas) the team has developed to be responsive to the RFP format and statement of work requirements, and evaluation criteria. It is sufficiently completed when it reflects the full, initial architecture of the proposal and the template and basis for writing the first draft. The map is maintained throughout all writing activities to serve as

- The focal point for all proposal activities, including modifications;
- The proposal's "ground zero;"
- A macro reference point for team discussions and solution development;
- A "compass" for the writers;
- A quick indicator of progress for management; and
- The center of discussion for the end point lessons learned session.

### Conceptual Mapping and Egoless Participation

The proposal team is solely responsible for producing a superior proposal by paying attention to architecture, writing, and internal review as well as creativity, strategy, and follow-through.

One of the functions of the conceptual map is to allow the team to focus on creativity, best value, work progress, and final outcome while eliminating self-interest. Oftentimes, team members lose sight of their group role and responsibility. Ego—an exaggerated sense of self-importance—may hinder the progress of the group's creative journey and efficient communication. During this breakdown, best value suffers the most. The conceptual map prevents

this by getting the proposal team to work together as a unit for the good of the proposal.

Egoless planning provides for healthy group collaboration where the best ideas are incorporated *independent of the originator*. Suggestions are accepted or rejected based on how well they support the end product—not based on who made the suggestion initially. This collaborative approach provides your organization with a competitive edge as it transforms individual thinking into team thinking and further, into best value structure and messaging. It generates creativity from blended contributions, usually not identified with any individual.

### Left-Brain/Right-Brain Message Integration

A critical path to winning consistently is repeatedly shouting "best value" with words, graphics, and format throughout your entire submission.

The conceptual map, once completed, provides the organization for structuring and selling your proposal. Remember, the SCP sells, sells, sells! Successful sales are contingent upon one important concept: communication with the potential buyer. The science of sales involves the left-brain/right-brain phenomenon. In verbal interactions, voice (e.g., tone, inflection, pace, and volume) activates the left hemisphere of the buyer's brain. Meanwhile, the right hemisphere is stimulated via gestures and other visual, non-verbal signals such as movement, facial expressions, and proximity. Communication is much more powerful, effective, and convincing when both hemispheres of the brain are activated.

Proposal reviewers do not have the luxury of time. Their first objective is to thin out the stack. This means that your proposal better catch the reviewer's eye within this "three-minute initial review" or else risk being tossed into the rejection pile. The winning proposal must convey not only a positive first impression but must allow the reviewer to easily find the "critical win" information. Should your proposal be selected for a more intensive three-hour study, this organization becomes even more important so that the material can be absorbed (and recalled) quickly and effectively. Studies in reading interest and comprehension reveal that written material that activates both brain hemispheres and activates them simultaneously, maximizes communication throughput.

Once past the initial review, the SPC delivers best-value messages with

- Action- and caption-based graphics (right- and left-brain stimuli),
- Integrated active language (left-brain stimuli),
- Eye-catching layout (right-brain stimuli),
- Themed layouts (right- and left-brain stimuli),
- Narrative callouts (right- and left-brain stimuli), and
- Substantiating content (left-brain stimuli).

## Selling Best Value from “Start to Finish”

A new generation of solicitations requires a new generation of superior competitive proposals.

The SCP is designed to address three key proposal objectives and reviewers, as shown in **Figure 2** on page 12.

1. Pass the three-minute review (initial “technical” evaluation) to move into the next phase of the process, the three-hour review.
2. Maximize the evaluation rating during the three-hour review (subsequent, more detailed “technical” review) by communicating a variety of best-value propositions and overcoming any reviewer rejections based on biases, order of reading, area of interest, or reading fatigue.
3. Convince the final three-minute reviewer (source-selection authority/decider) that your proposal, based upon best value and not just low cost, should be awarded the contract.

Every potential corporate or personnel discriminator is a potential basis for best-value selling. Selling through text or graphics beyond the cost/price document and touching every proposal volume will provide your organization with substantial competitive advantage in the procurement competition.

Best-value messaging begins with the proposal cover. As the first impression, the proposal cover must reflect the best value of the proposal. A “good” proposal will have a professionally made cover that includes:

- To whom it is sent,
- From whom it is sent,
- The solicitation it is in response to, and
- Other pertinent reference information.

This is fine, but when has “good” ever been enough?

SCPs start selling best value immediately with the proposal cover, as shown in **Example 1** on page 14. It maximizes a key opportunity to solicit an immediate, positive response by the reviewer. Accentuating the use of the customer’s logo, creative display of reference information, and use of an effective solution-based center graphic forces the reviewer to want to see more. This moves the proposal on to the next review and closer to the “win.”

A good example is cost/price information. While excluded in “technical” (noncost/price) volumes, using a graphic that reflects how the solution saves personnel resources, improves efficiency/throughput or eliminates unnecessary current processes is not only acceptable but a winning idea for every volume cover.

Best-value selling continues with the letter of transmittal and throughout each major section of each proposal volume/book, as noted in **Example 2** on page 16.

### Best Value: Letter of Transmittal

Most letters of transmittal are perfunctory, boring, and completely miss the opportunity to sell. The letter of transmittal is the reviewer’s introduction to your best-value solution. In the SCP, it is less than two pages, is on corporate stationery, and is signed by a corporate officer in a position of authority. Its purpose is to summarize the proposal value proposition.

### Open the Door to Winning: The Executive Summary

The executive summary is perhaps the most critical selling section. It is usually read by the initial three-minute reviewer (remember, he or she is the one who will determine if your proposal should be reviewed further and also determines the evaluation score) and by the final three-minute reviewer (usually called the “source-selection authority” in government and the “ultimate decision-maker” in commerce). The executive summary must always contain a summary of the best-value messages found in the proposal body.

### The Compliance Matrix

Including a compliance matrix itemizing every solicitation requirement and their location in the proposal is reflective of best value. It is most important for the requirement-driven reviewer who needs to know that every requirement is acknowledged and addressed and easily found within the document.

### Best Value vs. The Competition

Although it is very human to want to cast the competitor in a negative light, only positive words or statements are used in an SCP. Instead, comparisons for competitive advantage (ghosting) focus on the features and benefits of the solution proposed by your company rather than focusing on the negatives of the competitors. For example, if you are proposing a system that is faster than your competitor’s system, you can:

1. Boast about its features and benefits in the section opening theme,
2. Substantiate your claims in the text with proof and data measurements, and
3. Explain why this system’s faster speed is a best-value benefit for the potential customer.

### Main Body

The main body of the proposal is the framework of an SCP. Themes—boastful statements of proposed solution best-value features and benefits—are substantiated in the text, headlines, subheads, captions, and graphics. These are the messages that flow throughout the body across all major sections and subsections of each volume.

Most proposals are very feature-centric without a correspond-

Best-value contracting is here to stay while the methods of proof within the procurement response, and of verification in the funder evaluation process, will become more and more sophisticated over the next decade.

## MAJOR COMPONENTS OF SUPERIOR PROPOSALS



Example 2.

Superior proposals include best-value selling in all documents submitted, from cover to appendix, for all volumes and sections.

ing benefit(s). An effective solution-centric approach ties known value benefits for the customer to specific solution features.

### Proposals of the Future: Show, Don't Tell

Today's superior proposal will require new and more elaborate creative approaches to win tomorrow's competitive solicitations.

There is no doubt that today's SCP will one day in the future be regarded as only the minimal effort necessary to "get into the game." To win the game, we will need even more.

Some of these advances include the use of *virtual proposal rooms* where geographically separated participants perform most, if not all, proposal development work. The proposal resides on a central server and all communication and collaboration is electronic.

Future proposal reviews by potential customers will no doubt be conducted in a similar manner. Tomorrow's SCP will evolve into electronic submissions, just as the solicitation is now almost exclusively introduced on the Internet. These electronic submissions will be evaluated with automated information technology-based compliance protocols and best value *smart software* tied to statistical databases for analysis and verification.

To demonstrate and substantiate proposed solution features, benefits, and best value, future submissions may eventually be required to include such reviewer aides as:

- Hyperlinks,
- Layered graphics, and
- Three-dimensional holographics.

The focus, as it should be in today's primarily paper-based submissions, will be much more "show" versus "tell"—more visual than narrative.

Form and format will be as equally important, if not more, as content. Just like an ad on television, the SCP of today and tomorrow must attract the reviewer's attention (three-minute review). Only then will it command the reviewer's detailed study (three-hour review). For maximum communication, it must appeal to both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, simultaneously, to be absorbed quickly by the reviewer.

For the immediate future, you're in control. Organize and assemble your corporate resources and capabilities for superior competitive proposals today, to unlevel the current playing field and position your company to be competitive. If you do, you will win, and win consistently. **CM**