

Bid Competitive Intelligence

The Art of Winning

Our premise for this paper:

- Competitive intelligence is critical for good bidding
- By and large, it's done incredibly badly by most bid teams.

Piqued your interest? Then read on, for views, research, quotes and methods that might help you to win more!

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The usual suspects?

Here's one of our pet hate phrases. A sales team requests our help on a bid – and when we ask them who else is bidding, they reply: "the usual suspects". To which we reply: "We didn't ask for the name of your favourite movie, my friend: we wanted to know who else is bidding!"

Know who you're up against

Boris Johnson once claimed: "I was the captain of a rugby team. You don't win a rugby match by analysing the strengths of the other side. You tell your side they're the greatest team in the world."

Unsurprisingly from Boris, that's utter nonsense. No motivational words will help you beat a more skilful, fitter, better prepared team with a stronger gameplan!

If we're using sporting analogies, we might be better to take the US women's 4x100m relay team and their stunning display at the London Olympics of 2012. In an event where races are typically won by margins of hundredths of seconds, this quartet broke the world record by over half a second.

Watch the race on YouTube! They come out onto the track looking the most confident. They're quickest out of the starting blocks. They're already in front at the first baton handover and at the second handover, halfway through, they're clearly ahead of the Jamaicans – who went on to win the silver medal.

By the third and final handover it's about not dropping the baton to assure victory.

Down the home straight, it's simply a question of by how much they're going to smash the world record.

So, what's the analogy here to the world of bidding?

The starting point for us is to decide whether we want to be in the race or not.

The first leg is everything that happens before an RFP lands. We want more momentum behind our bid, to have better insights, to have done our homework better than any of our competitors. We want to be on the inside track; to have our proposal sown onto fertile ground.

The second leg is writing the proposal, we want to submit something that's head and shoulders above anything they'll see from anyone else. We want to bring our story to life better than any competitor when we get the chance to present – in our messaging, content, style and rapport.

From then on, we need to close the deal, mindful that competitors will still be sniffing around, being disruptive – even if we're the front-runner.

And of course, in our world, that's the start of the real race – delivering all that stuff we made up at two in the morning when we were writing our proposal. And, done well in many contexts, starting to think about the renewal from day one of the contract.

Strong competitive intelligence is, perhaps, the second most important input to a bid, after the suitability of a solution to the customer's requirements.

Knowing which competitors are considered and the strength of their respective relationships with the customer empowers a customer-facing team to either clearly communicate their relevant differentiators – or to withdraw from the process and focus resources on an alternative opportunity with a higher probability of success.

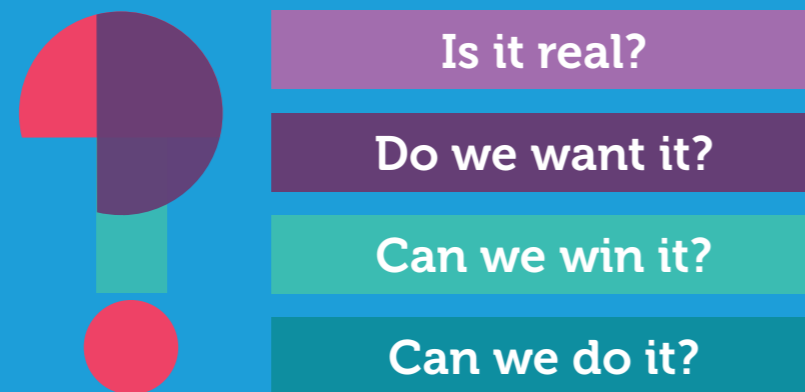
Vice President, Strategic Partnerships, Loopio Inc.

The competitive dimension: a cornerstone for winning bids

Let's start by exploring why great Competitive Intelligence needs to be endemic in your proposal process. We'd argue that it's critical in so many ways!

To bid or not to bid?

We coined a widely used four-part mantra for 'qualification' – the "bid / no bid" decision:



And CI clearly plays into at least the first and third of our criteria, right? As the Head of Bid Management for a global bank put it, when interviewed as part of our research for this paper:

Knowing the incumbency background and competitive landscape is critical in terms of knowing where to allocate our scarce resource / time. We have a good feel of where we're competitive and this allows us to have a frank conversation with a client if a bid just isn't for us or if there's no rationale for the client to move providers. Clients appreciate this candour so it builds goodwill.

Telling stories

A great proposal answers a simple question: "Why us, why not them?" Why would this buying organisation, these individual decision makers, choose us ahead of our doubtless worthy and hungry competitors – our "worthy rivals", to quote the marvellous phrase popularised by Simon Sinek in 'The Infinite Game'.

We tend to think of our story in terms of the three key messages – or win themes – that we need to weave throughout. Individually, collectively unique. We like to picture the reader closing the proposal, turning to their neighbour in the evaluation room and saying: "we really must choose them because..."

We get there by looking at three Cs: customer, capability – and competition.



Answering "The Spice Girls question": "Tell me what they want, what they really, really want". Their hopes – and also their fears. We worked on a bid recently to provide catering services for a large number of schools. The concern: what would happen if the kids didn't like the food? Miserable kids, angry parents – not a secret for success!



What's the first line of any good story? Right, "once upon a time". So, what do they have in place now – with that most-feared competitor, the incumbent? What's working? What's not working? And then "Happily ever after": once we've delivered our solution – what will they have in place? How will it be working? What will they be saying about it, about us? What will be better than back at "once upon a time"?



And then we can deploy various tools to check out the Competition, such as a SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Or perhaps we might use a numeric approach – here’s an example from the APMP Foundation course showing forecasted scores for us and the other bidders against the client’s criteria and weightings:

Scoring

Issue	Weight	Us	Competitor A	Competitor B
Recent experience	3	24	18	15
International presence	2	14	16	8
Technical innovation	2	12	12	10
Low transition risk	3	12	21	30

We’re going to have to emphasise our recent experience, and why that matters to the customer.

And we’re going to have to deal with that competitor where there’s low transition risk – presumably the incumbent. Showing how good we are at transitions – especially, with our recent experience, from them. Beefing up our transition team and plan. Subtly explaining that the risk isn’t transitioning away from the incumbent: it’s staying with them. They’re yesterday’s game; the market has moved on; they’re part of the problem not part of the solution.

Example

Let’s imagine they perceive that one of our competitors has “cool, innovative technology”. But we do nothing about it. In fact, the next time we hear anything about them is during the debrief at the end when the procurement people tell us we lost to them because they had cool, innovative technology!

So, we must show that we’ve also got cool, innovative technology. Or subtly cast doubt on how cool and innovative their technology is: “Some people mistakenly think this is about technology. It’s not; it’s about people and processes.”

Or: “Innovative? That’s brave...”

And there’s “ghosting” at play too. Laying some traps for the competition: holes you’ll dig that they’ll fall into, from which they simply won’t be able to escape.

And of course we’ll be thinking about the stories our competitors are likely to tell about us, the traps they’ll set for us – and how to counter those.

And then we start to write the proposal, from that position of competitive strength.

Our preferred tool of choice is a simple but challenging bidders’ comparison matrix.

	Strengths	Weakness
Us	Exploit	Mitigate
Competitor 1	Mitigate	Exploit
Competitor 2	Mitigate	Exploit
Competitor 3	Mitigate	Exploit

What does the client see as our strengths and weaknesses – and, indeed, what are they in reality?

What do they see as the strengths and weaknesses of each of our competitors?

And then we look at how we emphasise our strengths and (subtly) exploit their weaknesses...

...and mitigate, counter, address, downplay our weaknesses and their strengths.

A great proposal is a joy to read

That’s what our dear friend BJ Lownie, who founded our business in the States in 1987, famously said. And amongst a plethora of best practices for persuasive proposal writing – with the trend towards more conversational content being perhaps the most interesting – the competitive dimension rears its head again. Page by page, question by question.

Which of our win themes can we bring to life here?

What do we do differently, better than the competition?

Writing to the client’s marking scheme, to outscore the other bidders.

And it’s not just about the words, right? “People see what it looks like before they read what it says!” Perhaps the fastest-moving area in proposals in the past ten years has been the look and feel of the documents that the best bidders submit. Will your proposal be the best-designed of those in front of the evaluators?

Do all of that, and we’ll have written such a good proposal that, to quote Martin Quail, the CEO of one of our clients, “I want to walk into the pitch the first of three, not as one of three.”

An overlooked art: the data

Given its evident importance, why is Bid CI such an overlooked art? And why is it done so badly?

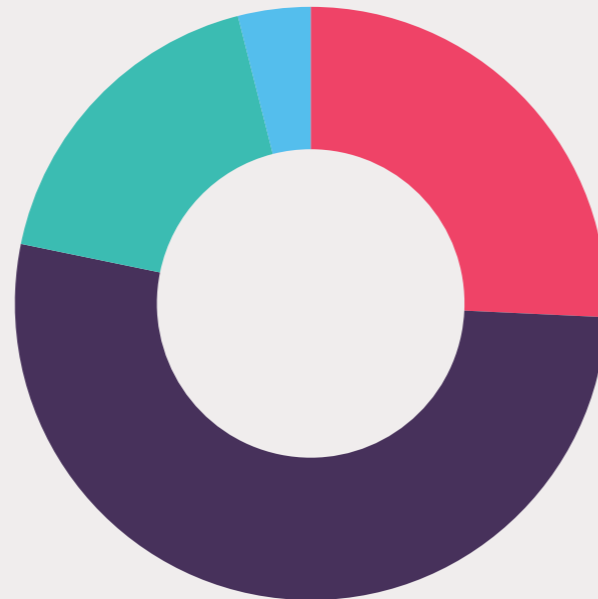
To celebrate Strategic Proposals' thirtieth birthday in 2017, we launched the Proposal Benchmarker™ – a free online tool to help organisations assess the maturity of their proposal capabilities. It's been completed by over 1,100 organisations since – from Peru to Poland to the Philippines. It shows, for example, that there's a direct correlation between proposal maturity and win rates.

One of the 100 questions asks for a self-assessment against the following question:

We have a robust process for managing competitive intelligence, that we use to provide insights when working on our strategy, solution and storyboards.

We ask users to rate themselves on a scale. There are four possible answers: "Absolutely true", "Largely the case", "Not really" or "Definitely not".

Look at the spread across the whole benchmarking database:



Definitely not	26%
Not really	53%
Largely the case	18%
Absolutely true	4%

That's right: only 4% of bid functions really have a sound grip on this critical component of what we'd argue is a business-critical process. After all, today's bid is tomorrow's project. Bidding is the job protection and creation engine for many organisations.

Indeed, CI was one of the four weakest areas across the whole range of topics we test. (The others, in passing, were training, pre-written content, and having an overly reactive approach.)

And, of course, having brilliant bid and proposal management capabilities in itself is a major competitive differentiator.

Even the literature in the bid and proposal arena doesn't really get it. Turning to the indexes of four of our favourite volumes picked at random from the office bookshelf, with over 1,200 pages between them, there were two just mentions of "Competition" or "Competitors"!

Two!

CI just isn't as endemic to the culture of the bidding world as it should be. Indeed, we've been exploring this with counterparts in SCIP – the Strategic Consortium of Intelligence Professionals: the trade body for people in CI. You might enjoy the below quote from one of the world's leading CI professionals.



The more I learn about the world of bid management, the more surprised I am that your exciting discipline doesn't appear, as yet, to use many of the tools pioneered from – and proven in – the competitive intelligence profession. CI is rarely a luxury, and delivers proven RoI.

Gordon Donkin
Managing Partner, FletcherCSI
Past chair, SCIP London



A five-step framework for Bid CI

So, let's have a look at something of a framework for Bid CI, which – with some flexibility – we've used with various clients over the past few years.



1

Organisational CI

The first step for great Bid CI is to tap into wider corporate knowledge of your organisation.

That might be accessing **existing research** – relevant extracts from the CI that your organisation subscribes to - or commissions at a **corporate level** to steer the decisions in the C-suite.

It might also be about unlocking the expertise of corporate leaders. We remember a couple of the bid team trailing in behind us for a meeting with the managing partner of one client – effectively, their CEO. We'd asked for 15 minutes of his time. He agreed, somewhat reluctantly. We asked for his current views on each of their three key competitors. Out poured everything he'd heard – on the grapevine, when talking to senior folks in client organisations, when meeting financiers and industry analysts. Even, when socialising with his opposite numbers in those very competing organisations: it's a small world at that level of the corporate stratosphere.

And the bid managers commented: "We've learned more useful stuff about our competitors in those 15 minutes than we've learned in the last year." They now have a rota of a meeting a month with different leaders, tapping into those wider perspectives.

Organisational CI was summed up for us like this by one of the SCIP folks: if one of your competitors sneezes, you find out about it.

2

Operational CI

Do you have staff working in clients' offices? Who do they bump into from other companies? Who do they work alongside, hear about?

Hired a new colleague from a competitor? What might they be able to share, ethically.

Worked on a joint venture? What did you hear or learn about our partner-today, competitor-tomorrow?

Work in a sector where your staff advise clients on their projects or procurements? Whose roles bring them in regular contact with your worthy rivals – and what can they legitimately share? Let's find out who they are. One of our clients had a team of consultants, advising trustees on how best to manage their pension funds. Amazing visibility of suppliers across the market... yet the bid centre had never talked to them.

It's about the bid function having an ear to the ground to the people who have their ears to the ground every single day.

3

Sales and Marketing CI

Because aspects of CI should all be recorded in your CRM system, right?

Because your salespeople talk, and listen, and network – and meet and hear about other organisations all the time.

Because there should be great account plans, talking about competitive positioning, shouldn't there?

Because the teams designing your products and services, writing web copy and producing marketing collateral, shouldn't do so in a vacuum, right?

Or are we being too optimistic?

Let's get out there and listen. And let's give those in the know the chance to share what they pick up: one team we work with set up a bid CI inbox so that their sales colleagues can easily forward ad-hoc snippets of competitive intelligence.

4

Bid CI

Our bid function needs to build on that organisational and operational CI and come up with a framework within which to manage the CI that's going to help from one bid to the next.

Is the head of your bid function measured on whether they have great competitive intelligence – and whether they use it effectively?

Have they even defined what great CI looks and feels like?

Is there a specific head or champion of CI in the bid function?

Is there a clear process and toolkit for the function to monitor and assess their competitors, and resource to do so?

Let's regularly go and dive into useful sources of information on key competitors, and summarise and share pertinent points at the corporate level – and then specific to certain products, sectors or geographies.

Here's a baseline list we use.

- 1 Website
- 2 Annual report
- 3 Investor relations documents
- 4 Product brochures
- 5 White papers
- 6 Conference / webinar presentations
- 7 Website content
- 8 Press releases
- 9 Twitter (or 'X') feed
- 10 Job adverts
- 11 LinkedIn
at the corporate level, or for relevant key people
- 12 Glassdoor
- 13 Industry analysts
- 14 Trade press
- 15 Google

If you're bidding into the public sector, are you using **Freedom of Information** requests appropriate to your jurisdiction to glean useful insights, with appropriate discretion?

And that might involve thinking creatively. So, when the annual awards came out a few years ago for the best new public sector construction projects in the UK, we fired in Fol requests on behalf of one of our clients to each of the awarding bodies asking for documents pertaining to their procurement process, scoring, copies of supplier bids. Some told us – politely, but perhaps not unreasonably, to get lost. Others: well, you'd be amazed at what they shared, and the CI that could be gleaned from that.

Do your bid and proposal staff have time, in a pressured and deadline-driven environment, to read around their market?

Because it really is about people, right?

This all needs to feed into a robust bid CI knowledge base. Briefing notes and round-tables. Battlecards. Playbooks. Other means of sharing insights. One client runs a quarterly call for their sales organisation profiling a particular competitor and sharing experiences of how to beat them in bids.

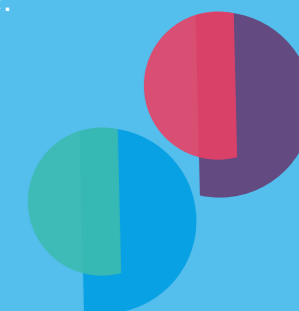
AI could be a game-changer here, too, of course. We've published various research reports into the how people are using – and feeling about – AI in the bid world. Competitive intelligence is consistently seen as one of the main potential use cases.



We have so many restrictions on capturing formal competitor analysis due to SRA [Solicitors Regulation Authority] regulations. As we aren't allowed to formally track and record in detail competitor analysis, we're then heavily reliant on the experience of our pitch managers, partners and pricing teams.

That has notable drawbacks, i.e. a person leaves with that knowledge, but it's also another reason why experienced law pitch professionals are highly sought after in our industry because of that niche knowledge.

Director of Client Experience,
Global law firm



5

Opportunity CI

And then we need to take our bid function's overall CI understanding, and align it to information about the specific opportunity we're trying to win – at every stage through the process.

We need to tick off all the things we really should know about each competitor. Here's a CI checklist we created that several clients have adopted:



01 Who else is bidding?

02 Who's on their team?

03 What solution will they put forward?

04 What'll be their pricing / commercial approach?

05 Who might they partner with?

06 What proof points of successful similar projects will they use?

07 Have they messed up similar projects in the past?

08 What are they particularly strong at?

09 What are they weak at?

10 What's their history with this client?

11 How does the client view them?

12 Who do they know in the client – and what's the relationship like in each case?

13 What'll be their overall bid / campaign strategy?

14 What'll be their proposal strategy / story?

15 What traps will they try and set for us?

16 What happened last time we bid against them into this client?

17 What happened last time we bid against them – for similar deals for other clients?

18 What might they do differently than we've seen before?

If you don't like long checklists: here's a simple one-pager conversation starter that we've used with some clients to get them to pool knowledge (and identify gaps) about each competitor at the start of the bid.

Resources

SWOT

Features & Benefits

Risks

Capabilities

Prices

USPs

Performance

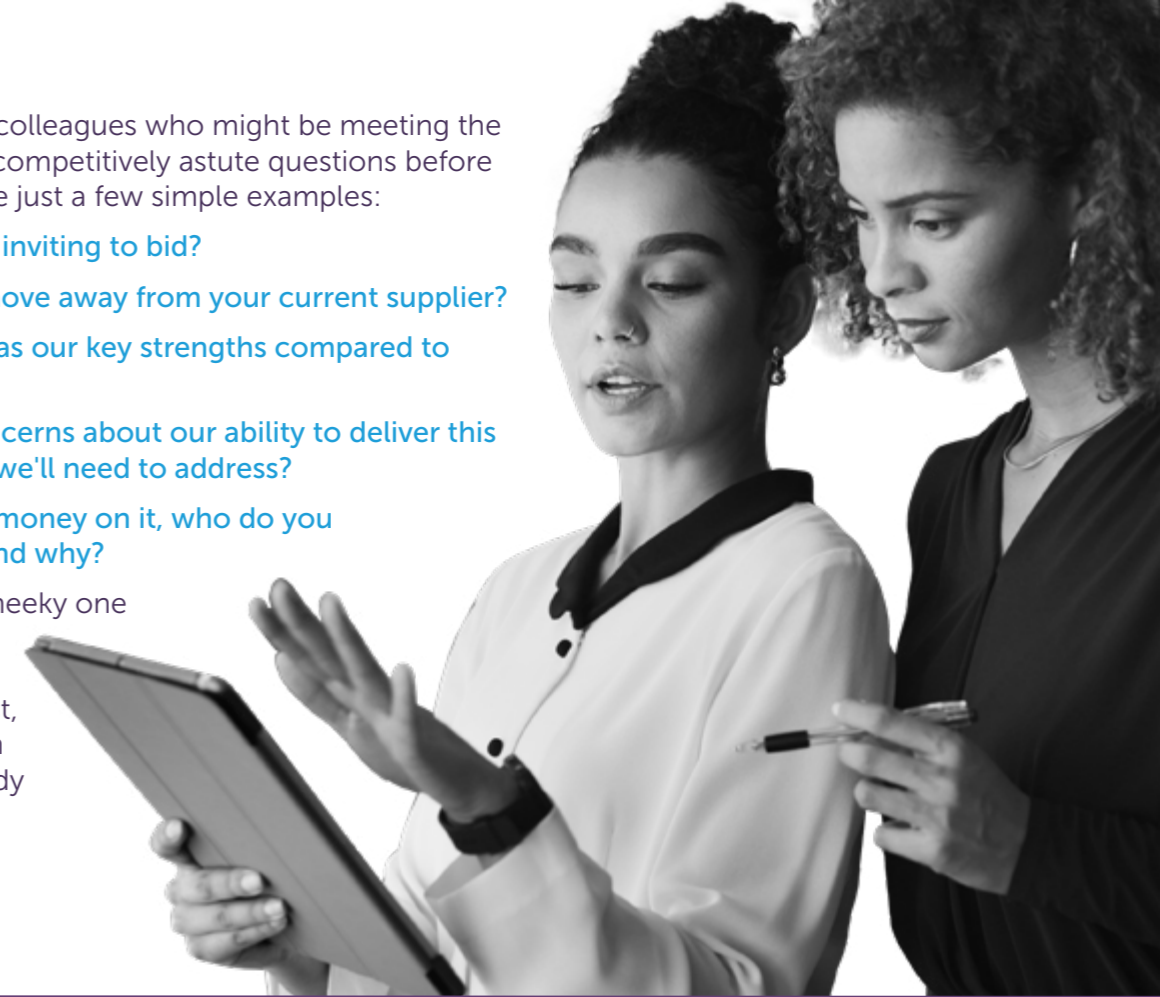
Solutions

Potential partners

We need to coach any colleagues who might be meeting the customer to ask some competitively astute questions before the RFP's issued. To give just a few simple examples:

- ➔ Who else are you inviting to bid?
- ➔ Why might you move away from your current supplier?
- ➔ What do you see as our key strengths compared to our competition?
- ➔ Are there any concerns about our ability to deliver this successfully that we'll need to address?
- ➔ If you had to put money on it, who do you think will win – and why?

(The last is perhaps a cheeky one that might not get answered, but with the killer follow-up: "At least, would it be us?" We can guarantee that their body language will tell you!)



And we perhaps need some form of competitor review forum specific to the bid, to bring focus. The "black hat" team, as some call it. That can be a detailed and time-consuming process of formally reviewing competitors' capabilities, discriminators and likely solutions and strategies. Frankly, we've seen real benefit from very "quick and dirty" approaches.

We recently held a very intensive session where we split the proposal team – the sales lead, the subject matter experts, the proposal manager – into three groups. We asked each to spend an hour researching a specific competitor on a bid, and to come back and present what they'd learned and what we needed to consider.

Meanwhile, a major construction client of ours has now started writing a "Worthy Rivals' Report" at the start of each bid, to aid strategic thinking.

Perhaps there's even a need for a checklist of the minimum acceptable CI that's needed before a team's allowed to invest in bidding on an opportunity.

And so on right through to your approval meeting before the proposal goes out of the door. Traditionally, that's a protective meeting – the flavour of the conversation being "Will this

be good business for us if we win it?" But the competitively astute governance team focuses as much on another essential question that's so often at this stage: "Are we doing enough to win?"

And we need budget for CI for the opportunity. No, not necessarily cash: but how many hours, days do we need to spend on this?

Because great competitive intelligence, specific to the deal, doesn't simply materialise from the ether. There's no magic CI tree.

We need clear accountabilities. If I've not told the salesperson upfront that they need to know who else is bidding, and what the client thinks of them – versus us – I'm perhaps being unfair. If I ask a subject matter expert who's just written some content what it is about our solution that's better than the competitors', without having warned them that that's something I expect them to bring to the table – I'm perhaps being unfair.

So perhaps that necessitates some training, some coaching, to help them understand why CI is so important to winning and how to go about uncovering it.

And at the end, what have we learned?

Win or lose, external or internal, learning reviews are crucial. Indeed, “win / loss” is a core discipline for the CI professionals. Let’s dive in and explore some ideas!

The external debrief

Realistically, many clients don’t offer feedback or debriefs at the end of their procurement process – and, if they do, it’s done so reluctantly because due legal process obliges them to do so in the public sector. They don’t want to be there, with the risk that you’ll start challenging their decision. If you’ve lost, your folks probably don’t really want to be there either.

Realistically, many bidders don’t even ask.

The most recent edition of our “Buyers’ Guide to Bidding” research white paper reported that only

58%

of bidders regularly ask for feedback on their proposals and presentations / pitches.

And when it does happen, the process can be relatively perfunctory.

When feedback is shared in written reports, we can see some bidding teams who are excellent at using feedback on their quality scores and pricing to drive learning about competitors (and to strengthen competitive weaknesses in their solutions and their proposal content). Others barely skim the feedback, sometimes in a sulk!

Where the buyers debrief us face-to-face, you’re often only going to get maybe 30, 45 minutes of their time. And the customer will have their script: the first thing to do is to shut up and listen to whatever they’re planning to share. It’s then about making sure that whoever’s receiving the feedback really is focused on teasing out answers to the highest priority questions:

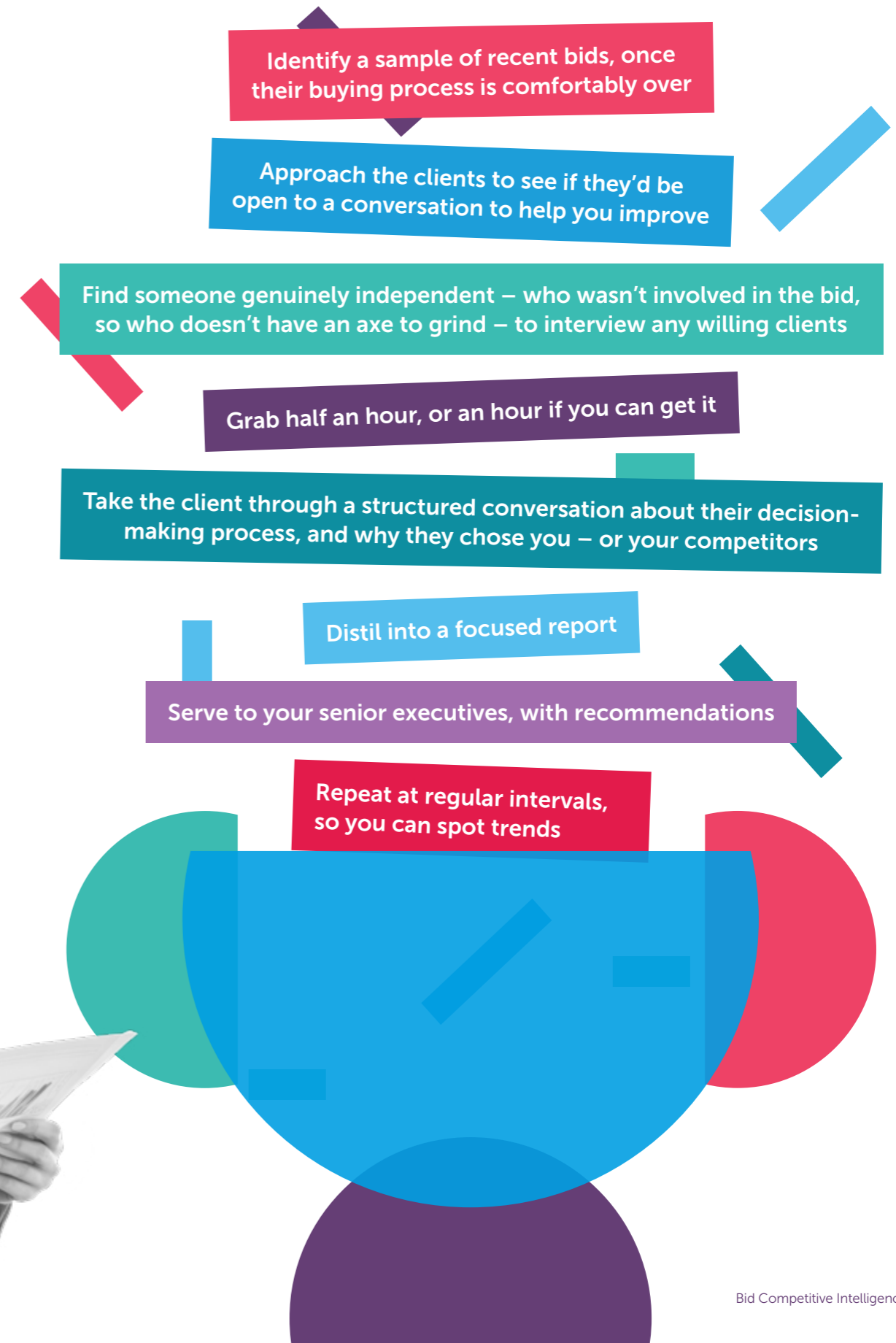
- How did you rate our chances of success from the outset of the bid?
- How did our technical solution compare to the propositions from our competitors?
- How did our pricing compare to our competitors’?
- What did you think of our written proposal compared to the documents from our competitors?
- What did you think of our presentation compared to others’?
- What did the eventual winner do that made the difference? [Recognising that that could, of course, be us!]



Win / loss versus debriefs

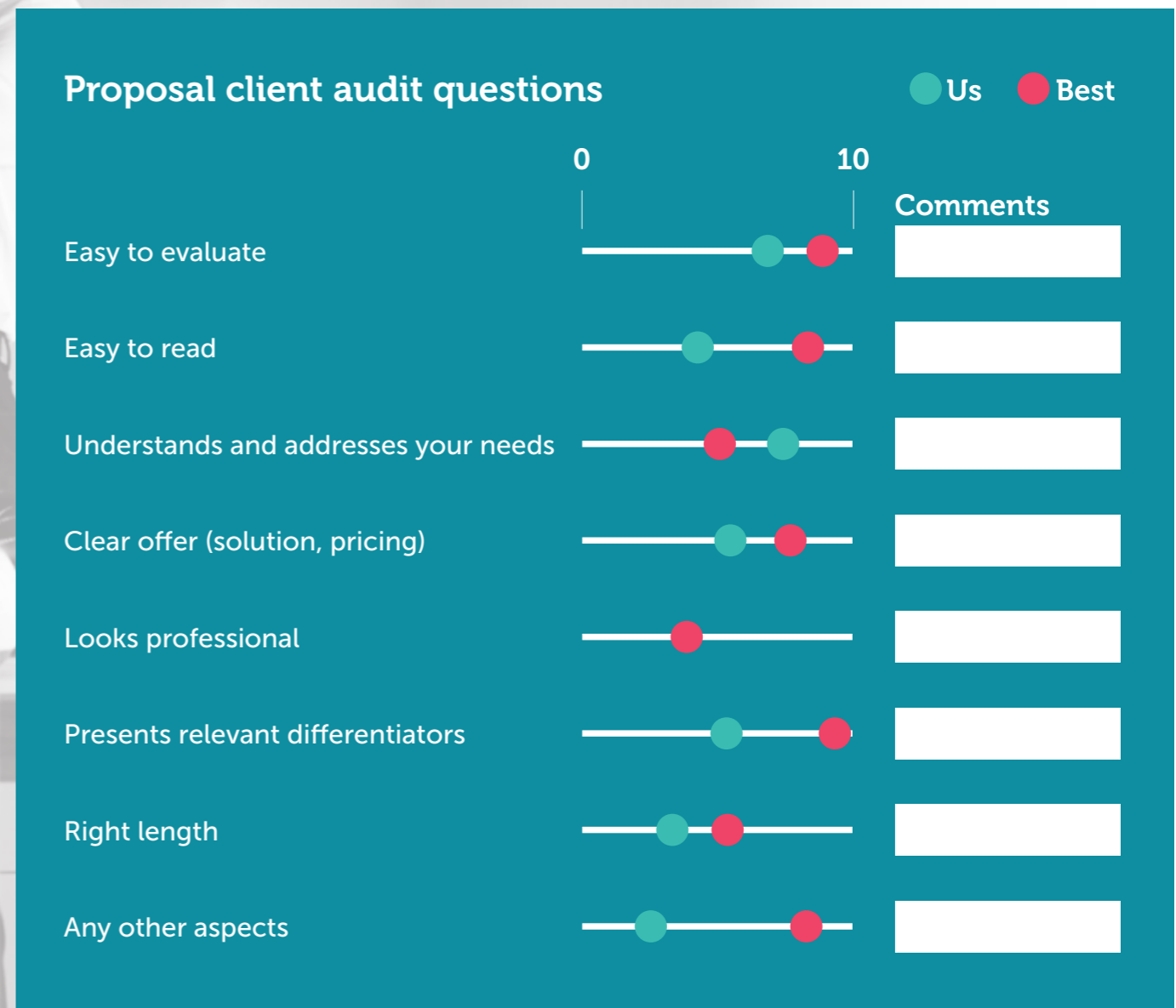
The reluctant debrief the client gives you after the award decision may not be as open as you’d like. So, you need a back-up plan. That’s where the discipline of a “win / loss” programme comes in, as more of a deep dive later away from the heat of the battle.

Win / loss – a recipe...





Or here's an example of a process we've used with various of our clients to audit evaluator views specifically about proposal quality:



Criteria they wanted to review. An assessment by the client of how they'd found the proposal. And then the critical dimension – how they rated the best of all the proposals they received.

This one's been typically used in face-to-face meetings. It could move online – although we're not sure that that would engender the trust needed to get it completed in the first place, to get honest answers, or to capture the commentary that comes when you're in conversation.

Internal learning

Historically, bid learning reviews typically only happened after a loss. They were a postmortem. An inquest. A participant studying on one of our recent APMP certification courses reported having been invited to a "bid witch-hunt". (Yes, imagine!) Yet we all know that learning from a win can be even more valuable than from a loss.

Many bid teams have neither the time nor goodwill to draw on to conduct internal lessons learned reviews. The bid managers are onto the next deal; the subject matter experts are back to the day job; the salespeople are too busy celebrating, or hiding away pretending a loss never happened. Hopefully it's just not a case that the team can't face talking to one another again!

And while we have detailed checklists for a learning review deep dive – 100 structured questions – we've moved more and more to three main conversation points:

1. What went well on this bid that we should do again on similar deals in future?
2. With the benefit of hindsight, what would we do differently on something like this next time – and what might need fixing?
3. What useful information have we gleaned about our clients or competitors that others may need to know?

You can take a nimble approach to this. A Google form or SurveyMonkey survey can take a few moments to complete and negate the need for a meeting.

So, the lessons learned process in opportunity CI drives the sharing of good practice and a stretch towards better practice within the bid and proposal process. And it feeds back into many areas: broader sales knowledge to support better-informed client conversations; proposition development; marketing communications; corporate competitive positioning.



Our Bid Management team is also now frequently called upon for CI to help inform our Product Development Roadmap, and our 3-year strategy and investment plan for the division. Despite it being free, RFP win / loss analysis and post-mortem intel is internally recognised as some of the richest CI and often valued more highly than external research we pay a lot of money for.

Global Head of Bid Management,
Financial Services



Summing up

There are no prizes for coming second in a bid, right? As is sometimes observed, silver medals were invented to make losers feel better about themselves. So the best bid and proposal professionals are passionately competitive. Not win at all costs. But win good business for their organisations, ethically.

To win, you need to beat the competition.

So, let's just reflect on what we've covered:

- We've talked about some key aspects of the bid and proposal process, and why competitive intelligence is so critical at so many stages.
- We've talked about how badly it's done by many bidding organisations.
- We've shared a framework for Bid CI, with some specific tools.
- We've dwelled on lessons learned as one key discipline.

How do you fare? There's a **blank box** here.

/10

It's for you to write down a score out of ten for how well your organisation manages bid CI. Go!

And then pause and reflect. What do we need to do differently? And what benefits might result.

Let's finish with a quote from one of the gurus of the procurement world over the past 25 years, Steve Mullins. Speaking at "The Proposal Symposium" – a Strategic Proposals conference in London a few years ago – he used this wonderful phrase:

The job of the proposal is to make it overwhelmingly inevitable that I should choose you.

Steve Mullins
Chief Procurement Officer

And CI is critical to that, right?

An award-winning team, with over 35 years' experience

Helped clients
win billions
with a capture rate of over **90%**



Over **15** years
as an APMP Accredited
Training Organisation
Association of Proposal
Management Professionals

Over **35** years
serving clients globally

Working across
all major
industries
including both
the public and
private sectors



More than
40 highly experienced
professionals



Proven processes
and tools



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