



Teddy Atuluku

Operating remotely from Abuja, Nigeria, Teddy Atuluku is the Innovation Lead at Void Studio. A graduate of Industrial Design from the prestigious Pratt Institute School of Design, Teddy specializes in strategic innovation, assisting clients in unveiling opportunities for new products and service improvement.

With an expansive portfolio encompassing various fields from wellness devices to restaurant interiors, Teddy's approach revolves around positive futures and collaborative work. His partnerships with diverse organizations like Better Earth Compostables, Dig Inn, and Unpacked, among others, demonstrate his versatility.

Currently, Teddy is contributing to a child safety start-up while managing in-house design projects. A fan of video games, martial arts, Manga, and the intriguing world of Chinese cinema, he envisions a future where design enables personal delight and social benefit.

WRITING PROJECT PROPOSALS

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Introduction

Fresh out of design school, I expected to spend most of my time dreaming up new products and helping bring them to life, and this was true with some of my early jobs, however as I branched out and opened my independent practice, I needed to convince prospective clients why I was the right person for the job.

At first, I tested different payment structures, and each sales conversation was a bit awkward, with me trying to figure out how much I needed to charge to get work done, how long it would take, how much a client would be willing to pay, and what sort of design related tasks I'd be engaging in. If a call went well we'd settle on a price and a set of tasks, then I'd send them an itemized invoice. This wasn't the best way to start client relationships.

Even when I landed jobs, I'd sometimes get into relationships with clients where my expertise was undermined because I started by setting the expectation I was an order taker.

Learning to write a good proposal became key to landing good jobs, and fostering great client relationships.

In this paper, when you need one, how to write one, and what makes a good proposal different from other forms of pitching.

Context

Most designers have presented their work to their bosses, clients, teachers, and peers. The importance of being able to speak about our work to get buy-in is something we all learn early in our careers. However, we rarely learn the importance of being able to sell our processes or project outcomes before they happen.

A proposal for a designer can take many forms, but at its core, it's a way to sell design to someone who may need it, but may not understand it. A good proposal paints a picture of how the client will benefit from working with you.

While I've used proposals to pitch project ideas for licensing and grants, I mainly use proposals to start projects with clients and set the pace of working relationships.

What is a design proposal?

Google defines a proposal as a plan or suggestion, especially a formal or written one, put forward for consideration by others. By extension, a design proposal is a formal suggestion of a design project for a client's consideration. But while this is true, I think it undercuts the potential of a design proposal. So here's my definition.

A design proposal is a short document used to sell your ability to produce a positive outcome to clients.

Why write a design proposal

Clients may come to you asking for a new product idea, a logo, or a website. However, clients often seek a larger outcome they want these tasks to help achieve. A good proposal shows you are aware of

your client's desired outcome, it aligns expectations, communicates clear objectives, and positions you as an expert not just an order taker.

Before writing your proposal

It's likely that before you ever send out a proposal you'd have had at least one sales conversation with your client. The quality of the sales conversation is critical to a good proposal. So here are a few things to learn from your client before starting a design proposal.

- 1. What they want to get done***
- 2. Why do they want to get it done***
- 3. Why do they want to get it done right now***
- 4. Any recent changes in their industry or company that have inspired the project***
- 5. When they need the project done***
- 6. How much impact or value a successful project will bring them***
- 7. How much time, money, and resources they are willing to invest to achieve that impact?***

These aren't all the questions I ask, but I find answering these 7 questions leads to a good understanding of my clients' needs, which means a good proposal, and a great working relationship.

Key Elements of a Design Proposal

Overview/ Summary:

A summary of the project, including what situation has led the client to engage in the project, and what sort of outcome they wish to

achieve. This frames the proposal for you, your client, and any other stakeholders that may not have been part of the sales conversation.

Problem Statement/Opportunity:

Clearly state the problem to be solved or the opportunity to be exploited. I generally do this as part of the summary. It's a necessary reminder for everyone why the project needs to happen.

Objectives:

State clear objectives that the client intends to achieve with the project. These should be about those larger business outcomes. Using measurable objectives here is best. Though some projects may have more abstract objectives like "improved brand perception", finding some way to measure that in the brief goes a long way.

Brief:

This is where you state task-based goals focused on how you can achieve the objectives. Using the "improved brand perception" objective, a brief item may be designing a logo, improving product material feel, implementing sustainable manufacturing, etc. These are clear, measurable, and achievable goals you can tick off during your design process.

Service offerings:

Give the clients a few ways they can engage with you with different types of service offerings. I like to take a page out of Jonathan Stark's value pricing methodology here to offer a low-cost low engagement service, a mid-cost service where I work collaboratively

with client teams, and a high-cost offer where I take on all the responsibility for project success. This presents the proposal more like a conversation than a flat rate and lets them pick an option that fits their budget. You can also play with this and make offers for royalties or equity.

Benefits:

Each brief item and service offer should come with at least one benefit to the client. For the brief items, these benefits should be aligned with how they will help the client reach their objectives. For the service offerings, the benefits should be around what sort of working relationship you will have with your client.

Timeline:

Give a breakdown of the project schedule. With smaller projects, you can simply specify how long it'll take to complete and when you feel reviews need to happen. With longer projects, you may want to use a Gantt sheet to show when each deliverable and review is expected to happen.

Budget:

State the cost of the engagement for each product offer. Regardless of how you come to a fee, I'd recommend only showing the final figures for each offer, and making them round numbers (Avoid \$10,746.13 how would you even get a figure like that. Turn that into \$10,800, or better yet \$11,000).

Risks:

List potential risks and how they will be mitigated or handled. This may include delays in timelines, parts of the project that are outside your control, late communication, and misunderstandings about deliverables. Anything that may be troublesome should go into this segment. Eg. “shipping delays may slow prototype reviews, but I’ll keep you informed” or “If I ever need to reschedule a meeting, I’ll notify you 24 hours ahead of time”.

About:

I generally don’t include an about section or a bio, but I include a link to my website. That way if any stakeholders are curious about who I am or my previous work, they have easy access to learn more about me and my practice.

Tips for an effective proposal

To have a proposal land effectively, you want to be clear and concise in your wording. Avoid spelling mistakes, and keep a structured flow. Keep it as short as possible without obscuring information. Referring back to benefits and objectives is also a big way to differentiate yourself from other designers your clients may be considering, and it helps you keep track of what’s important on a project, avoiding scope creep, and misaligned expectations.

Having a few offer options also leads clients to compare your offers with each other, rather than your price with your competitors.

Case Study: Safetods

While I’m still learning and improving my proposals, here’s a case study of a proposal for a children's safety brand. I mentioned before

that proposals are like conversations, and this is a perfect example. Throughout our sales conversation, the proposal developed and got more focused. The key objectives stayed the same, but the offer changed.

Our first proposal was structured with Objectives, Offer options, benefits for each option, a timeline, risks, and a price. Below are some segments pulled from the proposal.

Objectives:

- 1. Create a brand identity that Safetods' customers can build a community around.*
- 2. Build a market position for Safetods that raises her value against other child safety products and potential competitors,*
- 3. Create marketing messaging to help educate customers and build a community around the Safetods brands*

Option 1:

Deliverables

- Create a brand identity for Safetods to help with recognition by the public and build affiliation with customers.*
- Create marketing plans to promote Safetods around instructional materials like how-to pdfs, blog posts, and social media content.*

Benefits

- Reach ideal customers*
- Plans to help build affiliation with customers*

Timeline - 4 weeks

Option 2:

Deliverables

- *Everything in Option 1*
- *Create and implement marketing materials according to the marketing plan in Option 1 for up to 3 months.*
- *Connect Safetods with important voices and communities for new parents to help build the Safetods community.*

Benefits

- *Hands-off marketing for 3 months*
- *Improved visibility through community partnerships*

Timeline - 12 weeks

Budget:

\$10,000 for option 1

\$20,000 for option 2

Risk and Assumptions:

- *The timelines presented in this proposal is with the expectation that the client review feedback will be done within 3 working days.*
- *All internal documents for Safetods shared with VOID will be subject to non-disclosure.*
- *In Option 1 VOID Studios is not responsible for the implementation of content and marketing materials.*

Safetods got back to us saying they liked the direction but they really couldn't afford any of our option prices and gave us a budget they would be able to work with while they grew their business. Our follow-up proposal took a very different stance, positioning us as partners over time instead of project consultants. See below;

Objectives:

- 1. Create a brand identity that Safetods' customers can build a community around.*
- 2. Build a market position for Safetods that raises her value against other child safety products and potential competitors,*
- 3. Create marketing messaging to help educate customers and build a community around the Safetods brands*

Deliverables:

A. Brand identity advisory-

- 1. Brand positioning and storytelling.*
- 2. Brief for outside designers to execute a brand identity.*
- 3. Help select and advise on creative styling and application.*

B. Marketing and testing roadmap -

- 1. Content roadmap (content ideas, deployment times, and tactics)*
- 2. Manage outside designers/ content creators to execute a content roadmap*
- 3. Review the efficacy of marketing*

Budget:

\$3,000 paid monthly for 6 months

While we ended up taking less money, we also took on less work over a longer period, and so far the partnership has been great. I believe the reason we could come to a conclusion that worked for our studio and Safetods was because we understood their need as a new company and were able to communicate that.

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Some pitfalls I've come across in writing unsuccessful proposals are;

Forcing offerings:

Sometimes what the client needs and wants are clear, rather than forcing an offering based on deliverables, it may make more sense to offer alternative payment offers or lengths of engagement

Price mismatch:

If the client's budget and expectations clearly don't fit with your price bracket, it's best to be upfront about it with them and send them on their way rather than spend time in a negotiation. If you happen to be desperate for a job, decide what you can do for them at their budget and give them a straight offer. Don't haggle over your offer prices, it discredits you.

Engagement length:

Don't push for a long-term engagement where you can do a short one, don't give a short time frame if it's unrealistic. It'll leave everyone frustrated and unhappy.

Conclusion

A proposal can be a great way to make sure you and your clients are on the same page and emphasize your position as an expert looking out for their best interests. It may take a while to find a structure that fits with the work you do, but don't be afraid to play around and try different forms. You may even be able to bring some of the proposal methodologies into your design presentations for multidisciplinary collaborations.

References

List all the sources and references used in the article.

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