

Getting Proposal Graphics Right the First Time

by Michael Parkinson



Sound familiar? You're not alone. These are issues that my company frequently encounters when starting a new proposal. To overcome these challenges, I created six mitigating strategies. These strategies can save you time and money, reduce hassles, and increase your chances of winning!

The six strategies are as follows:

1. Make the designers part of your team
2. Storyboard
3. Leverage existing graphics
4. Evolve the concept before rendering the final graphic
5. Use a template
6. Make the graphics customer focused

When you apply any of the six strategies to your proposal, you will see a decrease in team stress and an increase in production speed. The design process will be more enjoyable and your team will deliver more communicative, successful graphics faster than ever before. The graphics generated will quickly capture and communicate the right solution and the right messages. As you apply more strategies, the odds of developing a winning proposal grow. Below is a detailed explanation of each strategy. You will see why they matter and how each contributes to getting graphics right the first time.

1. Make the Designers Part of Your Team

Everyone on the team should share the same vision, mission, and goals. For that reason, involve the designers as early as possible. Make them a part of your proposal team. No piece of the proposal should be regarded as insignificant. Like authors, designers communicate vital information. The less they know about the proposal, the less likely they are to communicate the right message and the more likely that there will be disconnects, miscommunication, and lengthy reiterations of the same graphic. To ignore this fact is to give your competitor the advantage and drive both your production and authoring costs through the roof.

FAST FACT

According to Dale Carnegie Training, we want to use graphics to explain complicated concepts. Graphics allow the audience to follow at their own speed. Visuals accommodate all learning styles.

The designer (as well as the rest of the team) must know the role they play, what is expected of them, and understand the “big picture.” What are the customer’s needs? What are their challenges? What is the customer really looking for? What are the customer’s goals for the larger organization, their team, and their direct reports? What are the customer’s hot buttons? What does the customer care most about? What is the customer’s greatest fear? What terms do the customer prefer or dislike?

Designers and other teammates may have difficulty synergizing. If so, remind the team that they are working together for a common cause. Dysfunctional teams never realize or acknowledge that every aspect of the proposal is extremely important, as are those persons responsible for each piece. No single person can do it all. Therefore, in order to deliver a quality proposal, cooperation is paramount. The more the team cooperates, the easier the process becomes. Conversely, the more the teammates keep to themselves, bicker, or gossip, the more challenging the process.

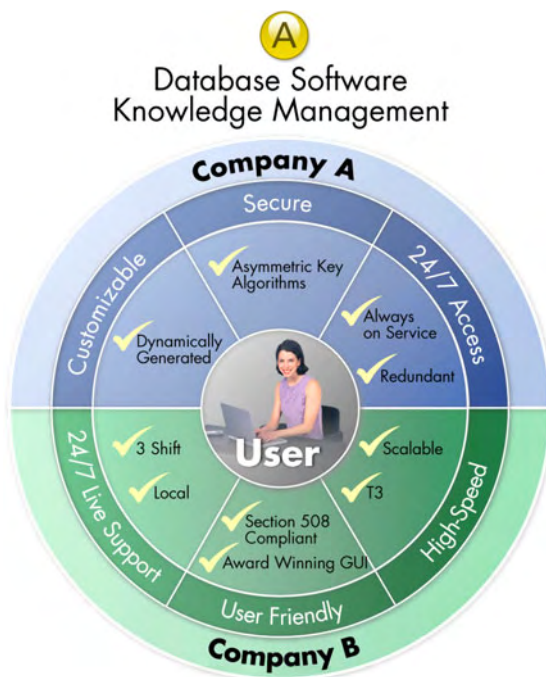
Each teammate must know why this proposal matters to them. Make sure all involved in the proposal effort know what’s at stake and what’s in it for them. Consider the following:

- A loss will cause a reduction in revenue. It may eventually lead to lower wages, fewer benefits, and company-wide layoffs. Many employees are counting on this team.
- Winning is directly rewarded with a commission or bonus.
- Excellent team performance plays a large role in evaluating your future compensation.

Involve the designers early and make them part of your winning team. Your payout is immeasurable.

2. Storyboard

Storyboard your project. Agree to the story that you will tell in the proposal before writing and developing graphics. Have the designer create graphics that address the solutions proposed for each of the major areas. Which would you rather write to—A or B?



B

Company A is Responsible for Tasks in Support of the User:

- Software Customizable by User
 - Dynamically Generated Information
- Security of Information Processed by the Software
 - Asymmetric Key Algorithms and Encrypted Information
- Reliable 24/7 Access to Software
 - Always on Service, Always Available to Users Worldwide
 - Redundant

Company B is Responsible for Tasks in Support of the User:

- 24/7 Live User Technical Support
 - 3 Shifts of Technical Support Specialists
 - Uses Local Staff
- User Friendly Software
 - Compliant to Section 508 Regulations
 - Award-Winning Graphical User Interface
- High-Speed User Access
 - Scalable to Handle Increases in Demand, T3

This technique will allow all authors to write to the same depiction of the solution. “If you cannot picture it, you cannot write about it,” says Mike Conk of Buchanan & Edwards, who has worked in the proposal industry for 17 years. Developing an overview graphic forces the authors to analyze the information and organize it in a way that is logical, easy to follow, and easier to write to.

The more information revealed during storyboarding, the lower the risk of lengthy rewrites and lost graphics. Finding a story and solution that everyone agrees to during storyboarding is a key to getting graphics right the first time.

3. Leverage Existing Graphics

The third strategy is leveraging existing graphics to create new, project-specific visuals. Typically, each company has an existing process, tool, and/or approach for handling each topic discussed in the proposal. Aspects will need to be tailored for the current proposal but referencing or starting with a depiction that has worked in the past is a smart move. Most authors struggle with thinking graphically. Attempting to develop the solution with no more than a blank sheet of paper or screen is unnecessarily challenging and time consuming. Instead, start with an existing image of a solution that worked in the past. This step will save hours and reduce stress, and the solution will be more thoughtful (benefiting from the evolution of the ideas/image as it is passed from one proposal to the next).

Picasso once said, “good artists copy but great artists steal.” In other words be smart and use what others before you have learned.

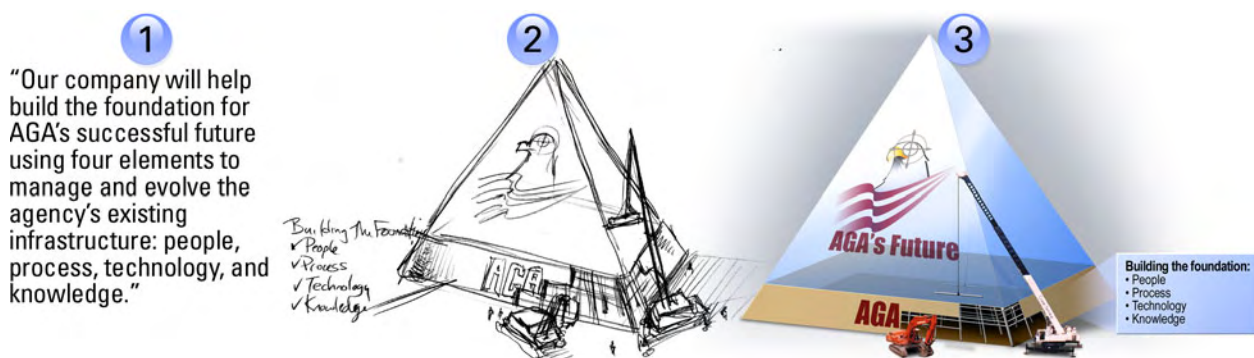
4. Evolve the Concept Before Rendering the Final Graphic

Proposals require long days with tight resources. The fourth strategy mitigates this common challenge. Proposals are driven by tight deadlines. If there is no time or money to evolve the graphic, the author should ensure that the idea is as far along as possible by reviewing the concept with the other subject matter experts/authors or the Volume Lead to verify that it answers the addressed question before assigning it to the designer. In turn, the designer should learn all that he or she can about the concept before creating the final rendering. The designer should sketch the solution first and present it to the author for approval. To ensure agreement on the graphic, the author should then get approval from the other subject matter experts/authors/Volume Lead. If they agree, the graphic can be rendered. If not, tweak the graphic on paper until everyone agrees. The graphic is now ready to be rendered on the computer.

FAST FACT

According to studies performed at the University of Pennsylvania, The Wharton School of Research Center, the University of Minnesota, Management Information Systems Research Center, and 3M

- People agree more with a position when presented with visuals.
- People will pay closer attention and react better when visuals are used.
- The quality of a meeting is affected by the use of visuals.



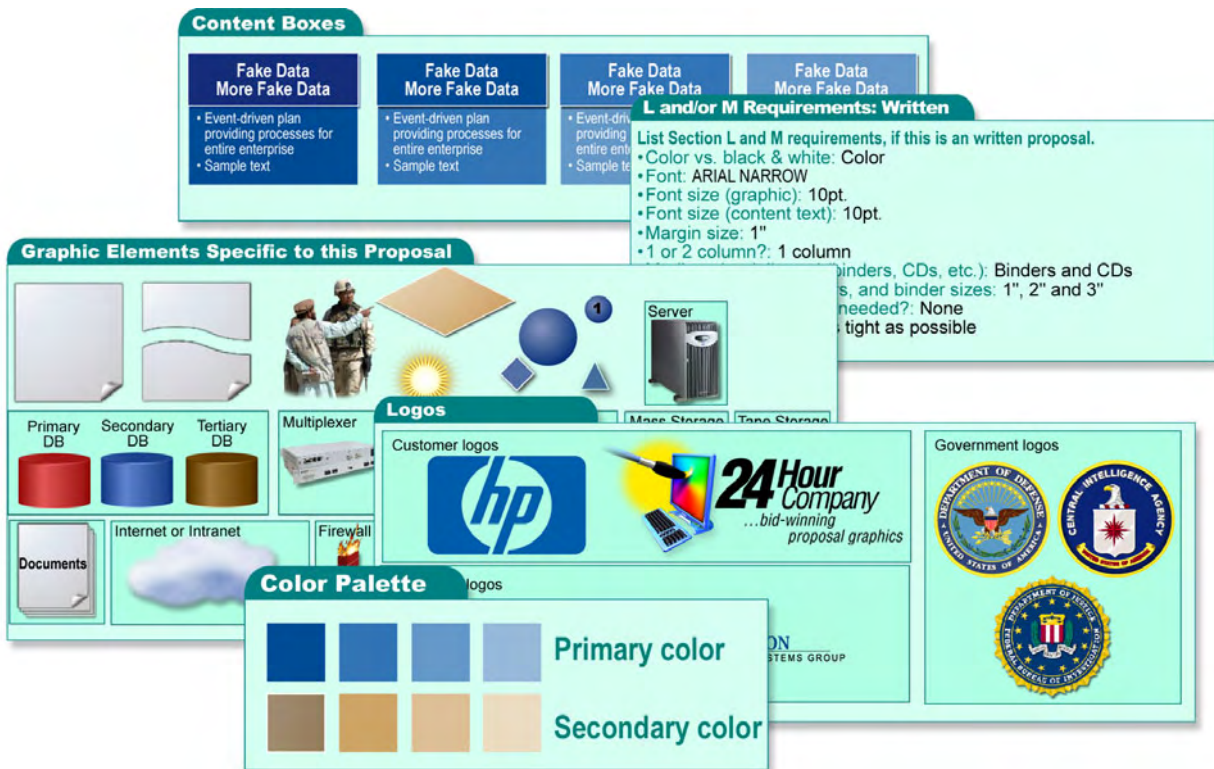
FAST FACT

According to a study by the United States Armed Forces, 83% of what we learn is through our eyes.

5. Use a Template

Using a template reduces the need for last minute formatting passes. It works every time. Agree to and use a template that defines all variables of the graphics at the beginning of the project:

- Color (primary, secondary, tertiary)
- Fonts (style for titles, subtitles, graphics, and content)
- Graphic style (i.e., vector, raster, silhouettes, and effects)
- Lines
- Capitalization (bullets, titles, and content)
- Arrows
- Log numbers
- Section L&M requirements



Make sure a Volume Lead and/or the Proposal Manager reviews the template with special attention to any relevant L&M criteria.

Ensure all designers strictly adhere to the approved template to keep graphics consistent and significantly limit the number of formatting revisions.

6. Make the Graphics Customer Focused

Lastly, the authors and designers must make the graphics customer focused. What is it about the proposed solution that solves the customer's challenge? Reference your answers to the issues raised in the RFP. Make it obvious. Studies have proven that graphics will communicate faster and be remembered better than text. Use this to your advantage. Highlight your features, benefits, and discriminators.



Ignoring your customer in your graphics often results in “bloody” review teams or worst: a loss. Bob Frey, author of *Successful Proposal Strategies For Small Businesses*, advises proposal professionals and presenters to make sure that customers see themselves in their proposal. If you are proposing a new satellite system for the Army, use images of Army personnel in the field or, if possible, using your satellite equipment. Employing this strategy when creating presentations has proven invaluable to all who embraced it.

Follow these six strategies and you will find that getting graphics right the first time pays great dividends. You will see an amazing reduction in stress, time, and money for graphic (and proposal) development and an increase in your win rate!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Parkinson is a partner at 24 Hour Company, the premier proposal graphics design firm. To learn more about proposal graphics support visit www.24hrco.com or call 703-533-7209.

Michael is also a professional public speaker and visual communications trainer. He has penned several published articles and 2 books titled *Billion Dollar Graphics: 3 Easy Steps to Turn Your Ideas Into Dynamic Visuals* and *Billion Dollar Graphics: 40 Powerful Ways to Show Your Ideas*. Contact Michael at info@billiondollargraphics.com for additional articles, on-site training, or for more information about *Billion Dollar Graphics* visit www.billiondollargraphics.com.