



AIA Best Practices:

The surprising power of feedback in attracting clients

Contributed by Ryan Suydam (Client Feedback Tool) and adapted from *The Power of Feedback: Building Quality-Driven Relationships*

Summary

Architects and engineers increase their odds of success by asking for and using feedback during the selection process. Here are three simple ways to use feedback that will make your firm stand out and enhance your prospects in the decision-making process. These techniques have proven successful in both public and private sector proposal pursuits.

The role of feedback in the business development cycle

Creating winning proposals and driving top-line business growth are tough assignments. In our industry's competitive business environment, everyone is trying to promote what makes their firm special during the proposal and short-list interview process. Demonstrating your "client caretaker" strategy will differentiate your firm as one that is serious about the quality of its service and increase your proposal win rates. All firms talk about being client-centered in some way. Be different by demonstrating and proving your client-caretaking process. Show your potential client how you stay focused on their needs. Asking for specific, timely, focused feedback – and responding to it – lets your client see how you really put them first.

In his book *Influence: Science and Practice*, Robert Cialdini, a marketing psychologist and professor at Arizona State University, describes six primary drivers of human behavior and decision-making. Two of Cialdini's six principles heavily influence the selection process: Social Proof and Consistency.

Social proof: Let your clients do the selling

Social proof is defined as evidence presented by peers. In the same way that online reviews help millions of people shop every day, real data from your other clients will create believable evidence that your firm is not only technically competent but desirable to work with. Feedback from past clients, no matter how self-serving it may appear, will trigger the same social proof response in your clients as an effective online review – especially when you are open about the moments when projects didn't end perfectly.

Consider including past feedback from clients within your proposals. More than just testimonials, showcase actual client feedback obtained during the project. You talk to your clients all the time, so whether it's formal or not, capture and describe how you take the pulse of the project and the client's perceptions. The most sophisticated firms display tangible evidence of their clients' success by including metrics, averages and other measurable outcomes. Sometimes, you just need to turn around the data you already have. Saying

The surprising power of feedback in attracting clients

“95% of our clients are repeat clients” doesn’t mean you’re good at taking care of clients – it could just mean you’re terrible at developing new clients. On the other hand, saying “95% of our clients have hired us again” demonstrates much more tangible success. If your process also includes client satisfaction metrics, include those too. Collins Engineers of Chicago lists on their website the percentage of time they at least met expectations (98%), as well as the percentage of time they exceeded expectations (76%).

When it comes to past performance, measure your clients’ experiences and share those results with new potential clients.

Don’t just share past results. Show your prospective client how you collect and respond to feedback by doing it. Asking for feedback during the proposal process does more than differentiate you. The very act of asking triggers fascinating psychological responses that actually increase your odds of winning the award. For example, asking “How responsive were we in providing you with a proposal?” or “How clear was our proposed scope of services, fee and schedule?” before the selection is made gives your potential client a glimpse at the way your firm will monitor how well you are meeting their expectations.

The impact of consistency psychology

Cialdini’s research calls out a second of the six key behavioral influences, a concept he calls Consistency Theory.

The principal of consistency states that human beings desire to be and to be seen as consistent. In fact, the term “inconsistent” applied to a person is a huge pejorative. No one wants to be identified as such – just ask any politician.

The reasons for this are complex (and explained well in his book), but the result is that people are hard-wired to behave consistently with their own prior words and actions.

Imagine you submit a proposal for review and within the proposal you describe your client-caretaking strategy. One element of your strategy is to collect timely, relevant feedback. You could talk about this for pages – or simply demonstrate the process. Introduce your prospective client to the feedback process by sending a sample feedback request. Let them know this is merely another aspect of your proposal for their review and that you will follow up on any feedback they provide. Then follow through.

Forty-one percent of the time (the response rate we’ve measured), your prospect will respond. And when he does he will now be predisposed to act upon his feedback. When the feedback comes back positive (yes, your proposal was timely, helpful, accurate, and complete), he has now stated, on the record, that your proposal was great. And since he wants to appear consistent with those statements, when selection time comes, he will be influenced to favor your proposal over any others. If he selects another, he then has to call you and tell you that, despite his positive feedback, you lost – and that appears inconsistent.

Firms utilizing this process have seen their success rate increase as much as 50 % – even with public sector clients.

Three simple steps

The three steps outlined here are not difficult. However, each of them, especially the third, does a great deal to influence your proposal win rate.

- **Include feedback from your clients in your proposals.** This lets your established clients speak for you. Testimonials and related statistics show that yours is the kind of firm that cares, pays attention, and probably will do the work to meet or exceed their expectations.
- **Don't just say you are "client caretakers," describe your client-caretaking process in your proposal.** Document your strategy by explaining when you get feedback from your clients, how you respond to it and who takes responsibility. Discuss this with potential clients as it lets them understand how you will learn their preferences and unique expectations throughout the life of the project or relationship.
- **Demonstrate your feedback process.** Ask for feedback before the client makes their selection. Soliciting feedback cements in the prospective client's mind that you really do have a plan, especially when you demonstrate the follow-up process.

How well does it work?

Will clients respond to your request for feedback during the proposal process? Research into more than 50,000 client surveys conducted by A/E firms found that 41% of clients will respond because they see value in the feedback process. They want to work with a firm that will ask their input and adapt to their needs.

Additionally, of those that did respond to proposal feedback requests, 92 % of the replies were positive, showing just how frequently clients' responses can influence their proposal decision. In the 8 % of cases where clients indicated that the submittal had missing information, the proposing firm more often than not had the opportunity to address the comments before losing. Many times they were able to engage in a critical conversation that saved the proposal and won the job.

The best process is one that fits naturally into your project process, feels relevant to both you and your clients, is simple to execute, and most importantly produces results for you and your clients.

About the contributor

Trained as an architect, Ryan Suydam co-founded the [Client Feedback Tool](#), a cloud-based feedback management program designed specifically for project-driven professional services firms. He helps AEC firms develop effective client experience management strategies and feedback programs that drive real, actionable results. Based in Raleigh, NC, he welcomes your feedback at ryan@clientfeedbacktool.com.

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This article corresponds to:

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Chapter 06 – Marketing and Business Development

Section 05 – Qualifications, Proposals, and Interviews