
“Marketing is not about putting a layer of icing on a layer of shit.”

Did that just come out of my mouth?

Yes, yes, I think it did.

Although I’m at this meeting, I’m not really working on this major, multi-partner proposal being run out of our Edmonton head office: I’m working on an even bigger one being run out of our Ottawa office. I’m here today as an in-house consultant.

Still living in Edmonton, at least nominally, my getting-to-be-routine work assignments in Ottawa make for a lot of backing-and-forthing as I *get* to go home for a weekend every few weeks. I’ve become adept at buckling in physically and throttling back mentally for the flight between Ottawa and Calgary. Not sleeping, never that, but taking my brain activity from the hyperdrive required for proposals (*Go. Go! GO!!*) down into the hibernation range required to tolerate sitting still and shoulder-to-elbow with a stranger for four-plus hours. Sometimes, horror of horrors, with a stranger on either side. Then I rouse to sit in the Calgary Airport for an hour before catching my connecting flight north.

Why don’t I just fly home direct?

I like to fly between 7AM and 10PM.

Well, I don’t like to fly when I should be sleeping, which is when airlines schedule direct flights to provincial capitals, bless their hearts.

Anyway, for reasons unknown to me but likely related to the travel convenience of the partner companies’ representatives (maybe they don’t like to fly when they should be sleeping either), this planning meeting is being held in Calgary, so when I grumped off the plane this time I headed downtown. Time zones are great, aren’t they? I’ve flown halfway across the country and still have time, if not mental capacity, for an afternoon meeting.

It’s a biggish meeting, too: We must be 20 happy warriors around the tables. I know our guys: about half the crowd.

It’s in a large-ish room never intended for working meetings. I’m not sure what it was intended for: a sculpture gallery? It’s square, window-less, and oddly lit with pot lights. The centre has the best light, and only adequate at that; the corners are downright murky. The executive responsible is an experienced strategic facilitator, so there are three easels with flipchart paper along one edge, under the pot lights, ready to capture any Big Thoughts.

I’m here to contribute proposal expertise. To listen to how they plan to do the work and to speak now or forever hold my peace if I hear anything that concerns me about presenting their solution in the proposal.

So, as they thrash things out, I listen quietly and politely. Tiredly, mostly. And well, um, I do hear a few things that concern me. Mindful of my *raison d’être ici*, I speak.

Reviewing with the Team

Me: "The organization chart looks, um, unusual."

Them: "It's organized by the company doing the work."

Me: "Not by what will make sense to the client or how it will work on the ground?"

Them: "Nope."

Me: "So, how will you explain the client benefits of your organization when there really aren't any?"

Them: "That's just marketing."

Ah. But of course. I listen some more. I speak some more.

Me: "So you're not planning to meet that requirement?"

Them: "No, they don't do it that way now, with their own staff."

Me: "They've been pretty clear that they want it, haven't they?"

Them: "Yeah, but it would cost a lot. If we include it and our competitors don't, we'll lose."

Me: "How do you plan to explain that in the proposal?"

Them: "That's just marketing."

In another life I might have said what was in my head; heck, on another day I might have said it.

I might have said that proposals give us an opportunity almost unprecedented in business. Instead of making standard one-size-fits-nobody products for mass markets, we have a chance to design a product—a project organization and work-delivery plan—to exactly meet this client's needs and wants, as specified in their RFP and as revealed to us through our relationship with them over several years.

I might have said that while we are in a competition, sure, we might still be able to set a price that will give us a fair return for the money we'll have to invest and the work we're going to do.

I might have said that this—designing something for the client and pricing it competitively and profitably—is the essence of marketing.

I might then have said that the proposal is only supposed to be the follow-on marketing communication part, where we present our beautiful solution as clearly and compellingly as possible so the client will agree that it looks like the best solution and will award us the work.

*You look mahvelous.
- Billy Crystal*

I might have said that the proposal is not supposed to hide things, or to paper-over weak spots in our plan, or to trick the client into giving us the work.

But in this life, on this day, that's not what comes out of my mouth.