

Assumptions are No Substitute for Speaking to Your Client

Take a good look at the last proposal you gave your client. In particular, take a good look at the assumptions you submitted. They shouldn't be too hard to find; they are usually referenced in the Cover Letter and Executive Summary, and the Appendix is often filled with assumptions that we instruct the client to review. We think that the assumptions submitted with every proposal will convince our client that we know what we are doing. Yet the truth is that all we are doing is creating doubt in the client's mind – and the fear that our company is more interested in protecting our own interests, rather than advancing theirs. Worse still, the client believes we have no understanding of their particular circumstances, and are flying blind based on averages, means and others generalities rather than on their specifics. Consider for a moment how you would feel if a neurosurgeon was about to perform brain surgery on you based on where the problem *is probably* located, or *was usually* located in the cadavers they worked on in medical school. Don't get me wrong, assumptions can be a very valuable and necessary component of our proposal, but we shouldn't allow them to replace *actually speaking to our client*. Our role in selling is to understand our client and build a business relationship as we get to know them. Each assumption that goes unverified or unclarified sends the client the message that we don't know them. A client recently told me that a vendor recently submitted a proposal containing more than 1,000 assumptions about them and their business. That's right, ONE THOUSAND. At that rate, the client can be sure that the vendor that did it knows nothing about them – and doesn't particularly care to.

Returning to the neurosurgeon analogy, which statement would give you more confidence?

1. “We know where the problem is, so let's drill a hole here,” or
2. “We assume the problem is here, so let's drill a hole just to be sure. Oh, and please note that if the problem is not where we assume it to be then we will have to drill more holes until we find it, and that will cost you more. Also, we cannot be held responsible for the additional holes.*

** Please see our policy on additional holes.*

The only way to prevent Option b) is to use your assumptions as a checklist to address during conversations with your client. Understanding the assumptions, their implications and necessity can actually help you credentialize yourself to your client. If you understand the assumptions, you truly understand the business; otherwise you'll end up selling something you don't understand, and your client will not trust you. The assumptions made by the architects, pricers, risk managers and attorneys indicate what the business considers most important. So find the relationships among and between the assumptions; they will help you have a *real relationship* with your client.