

WINNING

with pre-written content



Strategic Proposals

Winning with pre-written content

We've always known that a library of well-written, reusable proposal content – perhaps within a dedicated software tool – makes organisations more efficient at bidding. Why scurry round looking for answers to frequently asked questions, when they could be available at the touch of a button?

It seems logical that well-written, up-to-date content will raise proposal quality – and that win rates will also improve as a result. And while we've seen plenty of anecdotal evidence that this is the case, there's never been much solid evidence to prove that this really is true.

Until now.

Our previous white paper, [How the best win](#), showed that there's a striking correlation between companies' proposal capabilities and their success rate. That's based on our free online [Proposal Benchmarker™](#) tool, completed by more than 500 organisations in the past two years. We've now dipped into the data to look specifically at the link between proposal knowledge bases and winning. Guess what? There's also a direct link!

So if you don't have a library of pre-written content – or it's full of outdated material – read on!

This research will give you the evidence you need to go beyond anecdotes and gut feel, and prove why you need to get a grip on this critical aspect of proposal development.



From our research we have identified four levels of proposal maturity...



AD-HOC
15% of organisations



TACTICAL
62% of organisations



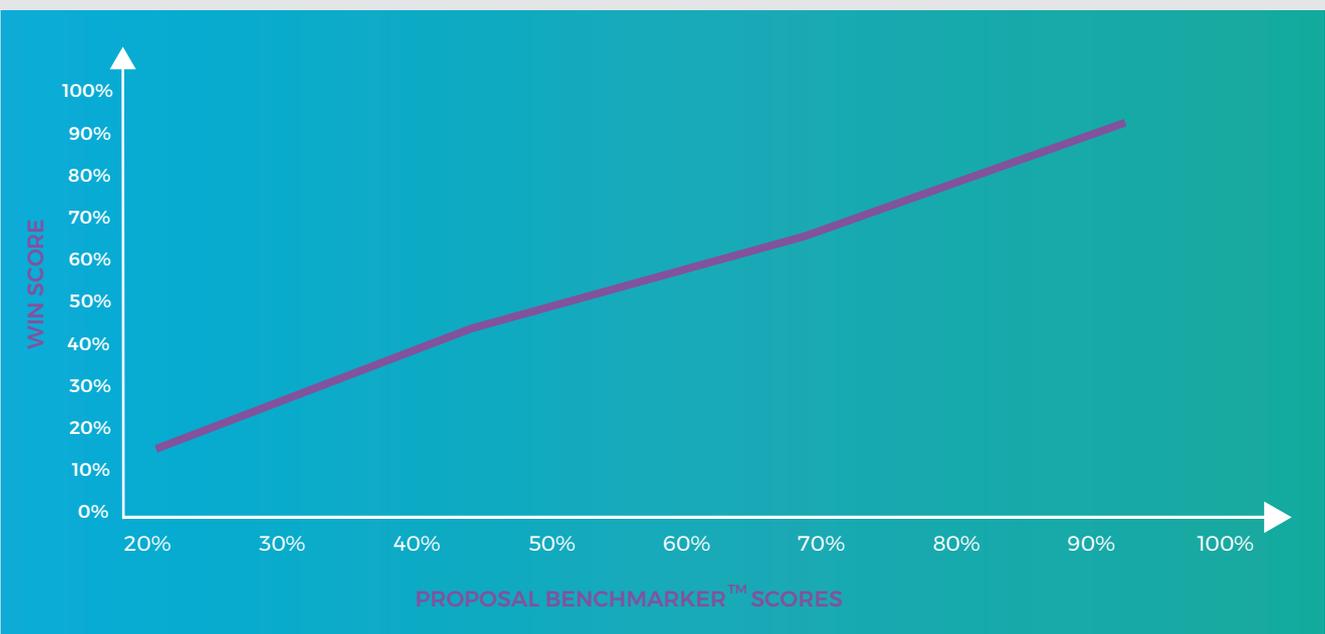
STRATEGIC
18% of organisations



STRATEGIC+
5% of organisations

The more mature an organisation's approach to proposals is, the better the quality of their proposals and pitches are, and the higher their win rate. Read on for more on how the knowledge base fits in to these levels of maturity and ask yourself "Where are we on this journey?"

The graph below shows how proposal capability impacts an organisation's ability to win:



Note: win score is a combination of the win rate related questions within the Proposal Benchmarker™

Proposal capability maturity and pre-written content



AD-HOC

At the ad-hoc level of maturity, we really do have a problem. The desperate salesperson pleads with colleagues: “Has anyone written a proposal recently that I can copy?” Or, perhaps: “What did I write last time?” In the heroic battle to churn documents out in time, the thought of managing content is far from anyone’s mind.

Once a proposal team’s been built, it’s not uncommon to find some form of library – even if this might resemble an untidy teenager’s bookshelf more than a ‘library’. It’ll have been thrown together some years ago as part of an enthusiastic initiative; since then, content will have become increasingly outdated. That’s inevitable, in a world where too few proposal staff try to support too many deals in too little time. Our report into [“The True Cost of Proposals”](#) showed that typical proposal specialists are having to submit a proposal every four working days.



TACTICAL

At this tactical level, there may also be access to shared folders of previous proposals – stored regardless of quality, or even whether they were successful. Staff copy and paste chunks into a live proposal without tailoring or checking for accuracy. As a result of this unmanaged chaos, the outdated content merely enables teams to write poor proposals faster. And they feel the pain: “We must have written this before! Why can’t I get hold of a great answer?”

And material in the main library never seems particularly well-written. Content feels lifeless and unconvincing, missing the sparkle that appeals to evaluators. A sense of “I could do better myself” creeps in, and individuals start to squirrel content away into their own local repositories.

“Creating a knowledge base of pre-written content is the critical core of an efficient and effective proposal team’s operations.”



Andy Lynam, pre-written content and writing expert



“According to the APMP’s recent benchmarking survey, only 58% of proposal teams have a content library.”





Strategic teams - still struggling with content?



the library. Everyone will use it – for a while.

“Building a knowledge base isn’t like creating a beautiful sculpture that, once crafted, can simply be admired forever. It’s much more like creating a beautiful garden. It’ll be perfect for just a day or two - then it’ll start to deteriorate unless it’s loved and looked after.”

As teams move to being strategic, they start to appreciate the value of this key building block for proposal success. They’ll have a process in place for maintaining content. Someone in the team will be accountable for managing

But maintaining the content is still always a struggle – the lowest priority for a still over-stretched proposal support function.

Content will grow out of control, like weeds in the garden. New material is added arbitrarily, without being screened for

quality and accuracy, creating duplication and confusion. Old content is rarely reviewed or deleted if out-of-date or no longer used.

Everyone accepts that the real subject matter experts should own the content, yet it’s a constant battle to get their commitment and keep them engaged. So instead, proposal staff without the necessary technical skills or up-to-the-minute knowledge end up second-guessing the experts, creating content on topics they don’t fully understand.

And that poor person supposedly responsible for the library? They’re probably also working on live bids and when push comes to shove, these will always be made a priority for them.



Moving to excellence at Strategic+

It’s only at the top tier of proposal maturity that companies really get the value of managing pre-written content superbly well – and put in place the resources to do this, as part of their endless quest for competitive advantage.

Sponsorship from the highest level ensures that subject matter experts truly take ownership of this critical organisational shop window. All of the library content is developed to the highest standard: brilliantly written, strategically focused, and using contemporary design and graphics. Everything’s peer-reviewed before being added to the library – using a process as robust as that seen on the most critical ‘will-win’ bid. Key material is constantly updated as your story evolves - not just tweaked when the system flags that it’s time for its annual review.

Clear metrics and good planning drive content development. For example, initial content is based on careful analysis of the most frequently asked questions that your customers ask.

How often is it used? Is it successful: does the answer continually appear in winning deals, or losing ones? The sales teams love it. There’s an effective closed loop from those working on live deals: what’s new, different, better, missing.

And there’s an individual, or team, with the right skills and organisational savvy dedicated to maintaining the knowledge base. Content management is no longer viewed as an admin task, but as a critical building block for success, led by a trained specialist who understands its value to the team.

But how does that all equate to hard data on win rates?

The link between the knowledge base and win rates

Let's go back to the Proposal Benchmarker™. We ask organisations to rate their proposal library capabilities, and to score themselves on a sliding scale against five key questions:

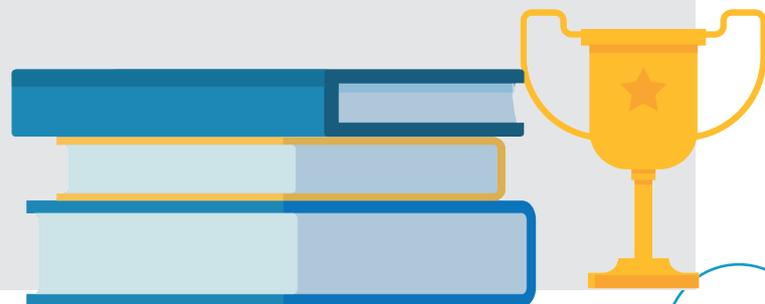
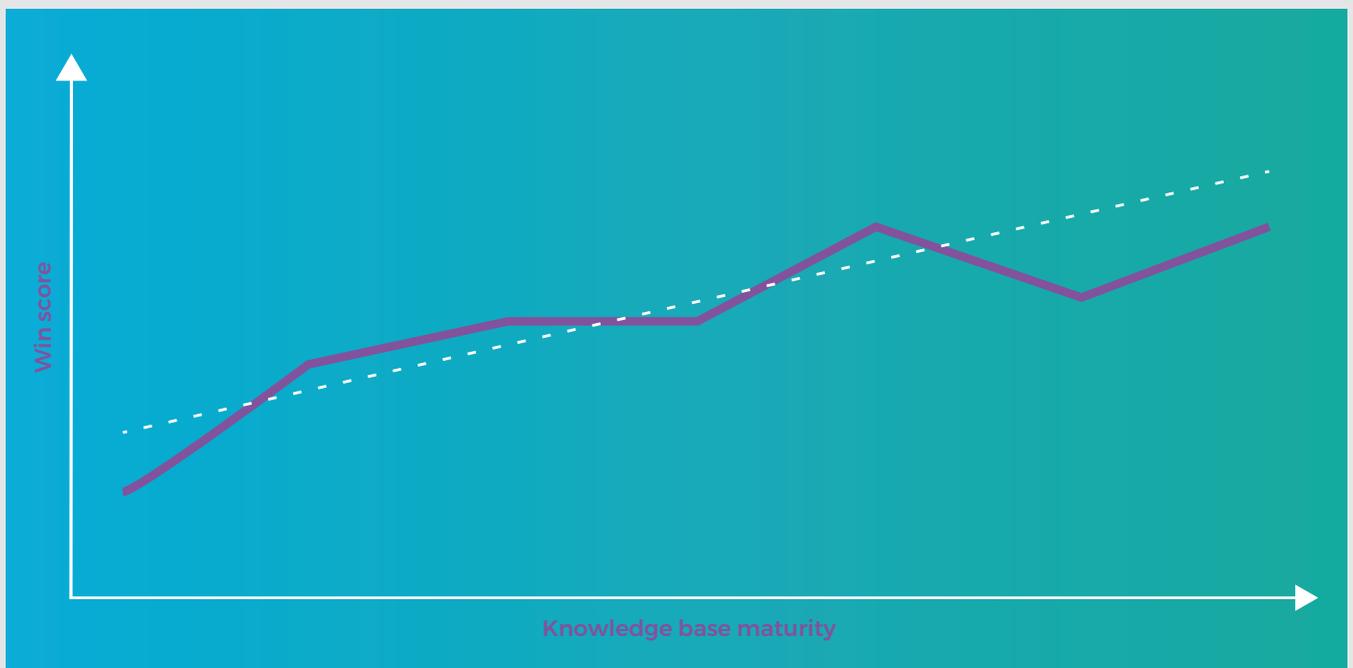
- 1 Do you have a comprehensive library of high-quality re-useable proposal content?
- 2 Do you have a strong library of evidence (case studies, success stories, metrics, etc) to use in your proposals?
- 3 Do you have an up-to-date library of content?
- 4 Do subject matter experts own the content within your content library?
- 5 Do you use a professional software content management system?

The results are striking. When we look at the scores captured from these questions against success rates (known in the tool as their 'win score'), we find that organisations with higher levels of knowledge base capability maturity, win more. We've plotted win score against the scores against the average score in our database for each of the proposal library capabilities tested. All of them show that the better the capability, the better chances of winning.

It sounds obvious. It should be true. And it is: the proposal teams that manage pre-written content brilliantly win more business than those who neglect this critical area.

Of course, those teams that do this well also tend to do everything else in the proposal space brilliantly. But the correlation is plain for all to see. And it's heartening to have our instincts now supported by solid data from 500+ organisations.

“ The chances of winning clearly increases for organisations when they have more mature pre-written content capability. ”



5 criteria

Let's dig deeper, for a moment, and analyse the relative impact of those five criteria. Which is most important?

1st

Comprehensive library of content



The key success factor is having a comprehensive library of re-useable content, with answers to 60% to 80% of your frequently asked questions, as well as accurate company information, clear solution descriptions and other material useful for sales proposals and tender responses. A good knowledge base helps to avoid re-inventing the wheel, increases quality and consistency, and provides the very best version of the truth across all important topics.

4th

Having a library with content owned by SMEs



Next on the list is ensuring that each item in the knowledge base is owned by a named individual, willing and able to validate the information at agreed intervals, and update it if necessary. Good subject matter experts, willing to take responsibility, are a crucial characteristic of an efficient and effective knowledge base.

2nd

Strong library of evidence



Persuasive content evidences why you're good at something, including showing how and where you've successfully done it before. The best go beyond simple case studies and awards/accreditations by including credible testimonials, compelling anecdotes, performance statistics (costs saved, quality improved), and other hard data that proves you have delivered for others.

5th

Having professional proposal software



Content is king. Especially if it's comprehensive, accurate, complete, and approved. With these key characteristics in place, the next important decision is selecting the right tool to manage and maintain it. Crucially, the tool must offer a user-friendly platform to give access to a broad range of people. Depending on budget, size of your organisation and amount of content, you may opt for an in-house solution or decide to invest in specialist software. Chances of winning won't be as improved as much as other factors, but the tool will still affect your efficiency and capacity to win more.

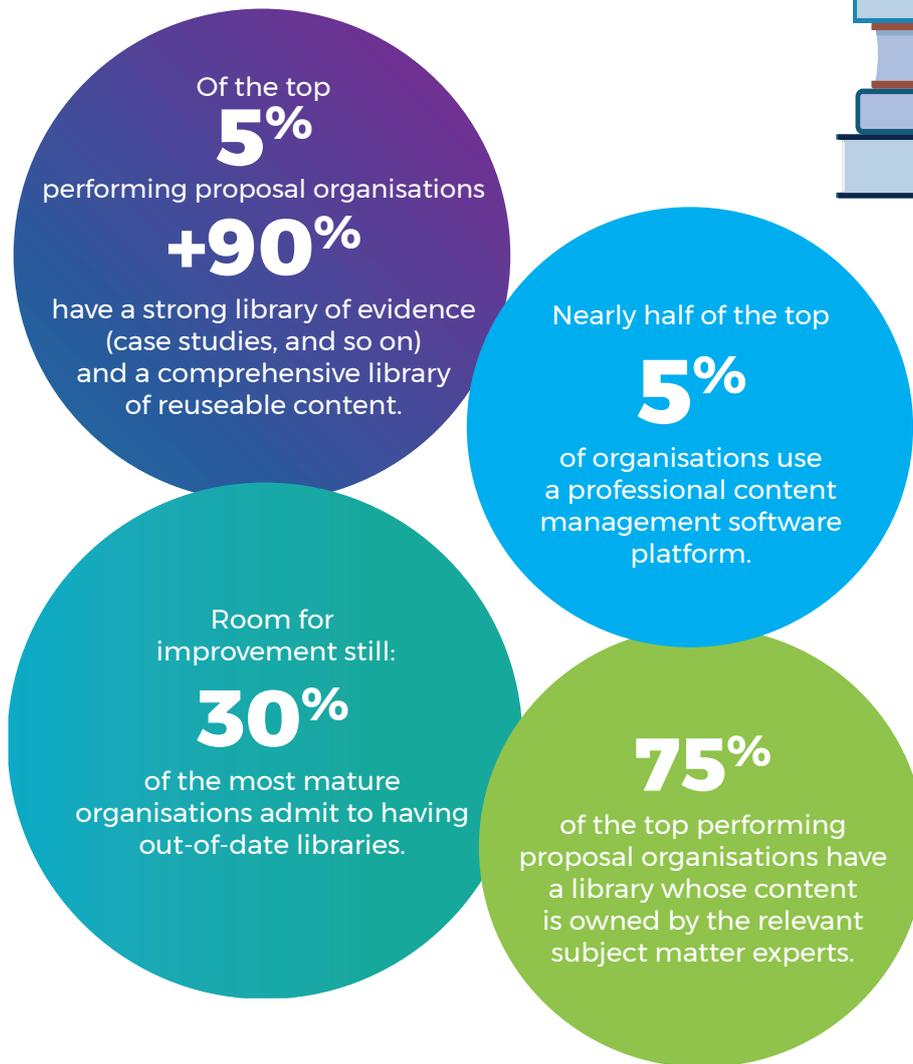
3rd

Having an up-to-date library



You need reliable information. Once you've found the content you need, you don't want to waste time checking that it's up-to-date. The best organisations have rigorous review cycles to ensure that all content is re-evaluated at regular intervals.

Some more statistics to demonstrate the importance of the knowledge base...



In summary...

Proposals must be carefully customised. There's nothing worse for an evaluator than reading bland, generic text that's been lifted from a library with no thought. "Copy and paste" is the enemy - "copy and paste and tailor" is a secret of success.

Yet here at Strategic Proposals, we've long been advocates of the critical importance of pre-written content management. Indeed, we've helped various recent winners of APMP UK's "Fiona Flower Award" for knowledge management to design their content libraries and processes.

We recognise that setting up - and managing - an excellent library of first-class content is key for a thriving, successful proposal centre. It improves efficiency. Critically, it also improves effectiveness. And this new analysis, using the most comprehensive data available, shows beyond doubt that investing in this area helps organisations to win more and win more easily.

So how good is your approach to pre-written content? And what would be the benefits of improving it?

Strategic Proposals and pre-written content

We love helping clients to design and build new content libraries. We relish the chance to help teams resurrect libraries that have drifted out-of-date. And we're expert in helping clients to embed the right processes to manage this key element of their proposal capability successfully. We'd love to chat, if you need support on your content journey!

 info@strategicproposals.com

 0800 009 6800

 strategicproposals.com

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