TechConnect Guide to Effective Response Preparation

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This guide harnesses insights from more than 25 years in innovation services and is intended for those who are new to responding to innovation projects, anyone who just needs a quick refresher or those looking to improve their response preparations.

The Goal and How to Get There

Some might think that the goal of a response to an innovation project is a contract with the client. Actually, it's much more basic than that:

The goal of your response is to attract the attention and interest of the client.

Everything you include or exclude from your response must support that goal. Why? Because the contract comes *after* you get their attention and *only* after you resolve issues like compensation, duration, intellectual property and more. In short, if you don't gain the client's interest, you don't even get to the point of discussing what a contract might look like.

So, how do you get the client's attention and interest? By preparing a compelling and engaging narrative about what sets your technology or expertise apart from all of the rest, introducing yourself or your technology in such a way that the client can't help but be interested in learning more, and telling the client a story that they want to read.

Your Audience

It's a cliche: "Know Your Audience." Know who's reading your work, and tailor your message to them. This is great advice, except that you don't know exactly who will read your submission. It's likely that many people will read your response to an innovation project, each with their own interests.

Reviewers might include:

- Innovation services program managers
- Client subject matter experts
- Client project managers
- Client marketing team members
- Client leadership team members, including C suite executives

Craft a response that persuades equally well for any or all of those reviewers. Keep the depth and breadth of your audience in mind when building your response.

The Narrative

Whether it's a novel, a movie, a song or a submission to an innovation project, an interesting and engaging narrative keeps the attention of the audience. Readers and viewers will quickly abandon anything that lacks a compelling narrative.
A compelling narrative gives the audience just enough information, in the right format and at the right time.

- "Just enough" means not overwhelming your audience with too much information all at once
- "Right format" means using broadly accessible language and terminology
- "Right time" means having a logical and understandable flow from one point or topic to another

Remember, you are telling the reviewer the story of how your knowledge or technology aligns with the project, meets (or even exceeds) the goals of that project, and how you would like to work with the client.

A useful analogy is a dinner party. When you meet someone new at a dinner party and they ask what you do for a living, you tell them the interesting overview because you want them to ask follow-up questions that dig into the details, if it's of interest to them. It's the same situation with your response to an innovation project: the submission introduces you, shares the high level summary, and allows the client to ask follow-up questions, continuing the conversation and (hopefully), leading to a contract.

Content

As you prepare your response, consider what information to include or exclude. Afterall, how the client will perceive you or your technology depends on what information you present and how. Here are some general tips about deciding what to add to your submission:

Non-Confidential Information

All information you include in your response must be non-confidential in nature. This includes any supplementary files you append to your response form: pamphlets, slide decks, videos, etc.

This protects everyone. No one can be accused of misusing or mis-appropriating intellectual property, if none has changed hands. Confidential information should only be shared after introductions have been made and both parties, client and respondent, have the opportunity to establish the appropriate confidentiality agreements.

Be sure to review all of the information in your response, and make sure none of the content is confidential or is labeled as confidential. Having confidential information in your response can delay the processing of your submission or may even result in its disqualification from consideration.

Narrative Flow

Little Red Riding Hood doesn't get eaten by the wolf until she visits her grandmother's house. . Similarly, your proposal should logically flow from A to B to C. For example, you could have individual paragraphs focused on different performance metrics, all of which demonstrate how well your technology aligns with the project. Tell the story of your technology or expertise, and make it flow from point to point.

Self-Contained

Response forms are often broken up into two components: primary and secondary.

The primary is the bulk of the response form where you share information about the performance of your technology, your experience, or what value your approach brings to the topic. The secondary is any additional information you can include such as links to videos, slide decks, or letters of support.

Your response should stand on its own without the additional material, because there's no guarantee that the evaluator will see the secondary information. Think of the secondary information as the icing on the cake: good to have but pointless if the cake itself tastes terrible.

If an evaluator needs to consult the secondary material in order to have a clear understanding of the value of your approach, your response has failed to capture their attention.

NOTE: If the additional document is required in the response, then it's part of the primary component of the form, and you can assume that the evaluator will include it in their review.

Answer The Actual Question

The response form allows for the collection of similar information from each respondent, enabling the client to better compare one response to another in order to make informed decisions. Therefore, when deciding what to include in your response, make sure that the information you provide actually relates to the specific question at hand.

Don’t answer technical questions with information about the value of your approach. Likewise, don’t discuss the market size when answering questions about the executive team.

By answering the question asked, you provide the client with the information they need to make knowledgeable selections about future engagement.

Repetition…Repetition…Repetition…

In general, avoid repeated information in your response to the extent possible. Repeated information does not give the evaluator persuasive new information to consider. Remember, you should give the evaluator as much good information as possible, and repetition doesn’t add to that.

If you find that you must repeat information in your response, do so sparingly and try to rephrase the sentences to avoid word-for-word repetition.

Scope and Eligibility

Make sure that you are eligible to participate and that your response is in-scope for the project.

Some projects will have limitations in place such as age, geography, or organization type. This could be due to specific laws and regulations or just the general preferences of the client team. The requester should clearly spell out limitations on the project page. If you can’t find any restrictions - or if you’re unsure they apply to you - contact a project representative to inquire about your eligibility. Why respond to a project you are automatically ineligible for?

Clients run projects because they’re seeking something in particular: technology, expertise, or both. Your response should fit within the goals of the project. If you’re not sure whether or not your approach is in-scope, contact a project representative to inquire. While technologies or expertise from unlikely sources are most definitely welcome and encouraged, all responses should still meet the same overall objective. For example, if you see a project about sustainable transportation and you have a sustainable agricultural technology, your project might not be the best fit, even though both focus on sustainability.

Focus

Make sure that you keep your submission tightly and properly focused.

For instance, if you propose an omnibus platform that combines several underlying technologies, you should focus on the unified technology and the performance it can achieve. How each of the individual technologies operate is important but of lesser concern. Clients may find a single comprehensive approach interesting because they can advance their project with a single solution.

Alternatively, if you have several separate and distinct technologies which each address different aspects of the project, don't try to cram them all into a single response. Consider submitting multiple proposals, each focused on a single technology. That way, you're able to more fully explore the advantages of that technology without having to also describe the other ones. A client may find a respondent with multiple independent technologies interesting because they can consider how and where to utilize those technologies to maximum effect.

Keep It Simple

Since multiple people of different backgrounds and expertise will likely review your submission, be sure to use plain, straightforward language as much as possible. Avoid industry-specific jargon and terminology whenever you can. You can't avoid all jargon when attempting to convey your knowledge and alignment with the project. However, by making your proposal accessible to a broad array of reviewers, it's more likely that all reviewers will have a good understanding of your approach.

Uniqueness

If you submit more than one response, make sure that each is unique and stands on its own merit.

You should clearly distinguish each individual proposal from the others you submit by using different titles with noticeably different content. If the content in different proposals seems too similar, evaluators may assume that you mistakenly submitted a duplicate response. By ensuring that each submission contains unique content, you reduce the chances of that.

Furthermore, each submission should encompass a complete and unique proposal, even if it only addresses a portion of the project. Submitting interdependent proposals can be ineffective, as all evaluators might not read all submissions, and a rejection of one response could hobble the others. Make sure that each submission outlines a complete approach, even if you have other related technologies.

Keep It Current

You should present the most recent possible information in your response. Describing your technology or experience with old information suggests that little-to-no development or change has happened and that isn't persuasive for solving a current problem.

If your technology is still in development, describe the current state of maturity. If you have an established commercial product, describe who actively uses it and the advantages they receive as a result.

Enthusiasm

You are the best and strongest advocate for your expertise or technology, and your submission should reflect that. Tell the evaluator what makes your approach the best one available. We've all read dry and boring documents; they lack enthusiasm for the topic. Don't bore reviewers with your submission.

A quick note of caution: don't take your enthusiasm to the extreme and use the response form to inform the client, "I can do that - just call me!". Submissions which provide little-to-no information and assume an unjustified and unsupported air of superiority do not offer the engagement you may think they do.

Limitations

Pay attention to any constraints or limitations in the response form.

Word or page limits may require you to alter what information you share or how you present it; don't be tempted to exceed the limitations. They may be hard-coded into the form, or the evaluator may simply stop reading when they've reached the limit. Either way, you run the risk of presenting an incomplete picture.

Content type: if the form asks you to provide X content, and you provide Y instead, it may appear to the evaluator that you're attempting to shoehorn in additional information that you would otherwise not be able to include or that you cannot follow directions properly. Remember, the form asks the same questions of each respondent; don't try to force in different information.

Contact Information

Make sure that you have access to any incoming messages, either by phone or email. Contact information is only as good as your ability to respond to inquiries. A voicemail or email inbox you cannot easily access is useless. It is suggested that you use your individual company or personal email address and phone number as opposed to generic or centralized ones.

Innovation services companies and their clients may try to contact you with questions or updates and provide deadlines for responses. Missing deadlines may result in missed opportunities.

Conclusion

Creating an engaging proposal for an innovation project isn't like preparing a scientific paper or an editorial; it has its own particular quirks. After reviewing this guide, you should have a better understanding of how to build an effective and compelling response to an innovation project.

If you have questions about responses in general or a particular project, please reach out to TechConnect by emailing us at challenge@techconnectventures.com or, if it's available, via the online contact form on the project page. While we cannot provide specific guidance about what to include in a response, we're more than happy to answer questions.