



Chapter 4—Self-Interest Calls the Shots: What’s In It For Me?

People hire the people who show up. People hire the people they like best. And people hire the people who give them what they want—the people who can answer their question, “*What’s in it for me?*”

People in business tend to do what’s in their own best interest. Understanding that gives you a means to tune your offerings to their specific wants and needs.

People about to buy, or indeed make any major business decision, usually ask themselves three questions:

Will I be fired or be embarrassed?

What’s in it for me?

What’s in it for my organization?

Note which question I listed last. I bet this is the question that you and your company spend most of your marketing efforts trying to answer. Most contractors do. Guess what? You are spending too much time and effort working the wrong question. Yes, I know it offends your sense of logic when I say that. Yet it’s a simple fact of business life: When push comes to shove, most people will be more concerned about the risks and benefits of any decision to themselves than the effect on their organization.

So let’s talk about the two questions that matter most in marketing.

Will I Be Fired or Embarrassed?

Think of this as risk evaluation on the part of the buyer. By the nature of the organizational culture they live in, government employees are highly risk-averse. So when government employees are given authority to buy, the first question they will ask is “Will I be fired or be embarrassed?” If there’s even a small probability that the answer is “yes,” they won’t do it.

This is part of why credentials are so important to the government. They are looking for something that proves you can actually do the work—and that’s about lowering their risk. Even if they like you best, if you are bidding against other companies with better qualifications you will not get the work. If a well-qualified company doesn’t deliver, at least the employee can say, “I don’t understand. They’ve always worked out before.”

Some time ago, I was working with a class on a competitive analysis. Up on the board we had listed their company as well as five other companies likely to bid on this work and were working on the pros and cons of each. The other companies were multi-billion-dollar software integration companies; the company I was working with was a \$50-million company. Nevertheless, the class was pretty convinced their company had a shot. A senior vice-president happened to come into the room. I told him what we were working on, then asked him to glance at what we’d done so far and give us his insights. He took one long look and replied, “We need to find someone on that board with whom we can team or get a small business set-aside.” He knew that, despite the high quality of the service his company had to offer, it simply could not compete with those marquee companies. If those companies were the alternatives, his company could not be the safe choice for the potential customer.

This is important to understand: If the customer perceives hiring your company as too high a risk, it’s not worth making the effort.

What’s In It For Me? (WIIFMs)

I’m talking now about an individual’s needs, or, if you prefer, personal agenda. Some people want advancement, others want recognition, and still others want to sit back and do next to nothing. Some people want to spend more time with their family, or on their favorite sport or hobby. Others want to be seen as the best and brightest. And some people simply want to be comfortable working with people who are just like them.

How does this work? The agency needs to update its information systems. The decision-maker wants a promotion. All other things being equal—that is, all the companies bidding are qualified to do the work, have a track record, and have good technical solutions—the decision-maker is going to choose the bidder who makes him look best, and thus gives him the best chance of getting a promotion.

Now what does the winning company propose that makes him look best? It could be lots of innovation, if that is what counts in his agency. If quick-turnaround

matters, it might be quickly implemented, off-the-shelf solutions. Or it might be a complete make-over that builds him an empire. Knowing this is essential to the success of your proposal, but you will never find it clearly spelled out in a Request for Proposal (RFP). The RFP will never tell you that your prospective customer thinks the best way to get his promotion is to

Yet in my classes people often argue that their customer's WIIFMs are the same as what their organization wants, that their customers are loyal, mission-driven, selfless people. I then ask, "So what would it take to get them to leave their jobs and careers?" What quickly emerges is that personal WIIFMs predominate. The issues of health, family, professional development, challenges, pay, and recognition would win out over their organization's needs.

Let's look at some of the typical WIIFMs you are likely to encounter among government employees.

Career advancement. As in most organizations, careerism is rampant in the government. These people make decisions that make them look good, look smart, and will get them promoted. What will a colonel do to become a general? Just about anything. Will they spend an extra million dollars on a program in order to buy it from a marquee company that has a slightly better chance of delivering than a lesser-known company? Absolutely. Will they buy it from a marquee company that has no better chance of delivering, but will look better if it fails? Yes, indeed. Will they buy it from a marquee company that might even have a slightly less chance of succeeding, but because of their name he will look better buying from them? You betcha!

Control issues. Some people are micro-managers. These people don't care that the RFP calls for quarterly reports. To satisfy their strong need to control, they want to know what's happening on a weekly, or even daily, basis. So if the management plan in your response doesn't address that, doesn't include something that assures this micro-manager about how often and how quickly you will escalate issues, you won't be hired. On the other hand, if you are dealing with a macro-manager and write something into your response about providing daily reports, that person will decide you obviously need too much supervision—"They're supposed to do the work, not me!"—and look elsewhere to award the job.

Time is money, my money. If you've ever had a child in daycare that requires pickup by, say, 6:00 p.m., you know that the meter starts running fast at 6:01 (here on the East Coast, it can be \$5.00 a minute). So picture a government employee, with a child in daycare, who is currently dealing with a contractor whose meetings often run over and have therefore cost her \$100 in extra daycare costs. Now suppose that, on the next bid she deals with, a contractor proposes that all meetings will begin no earlier than 10:00 a.m. and finish no later than 3:00 p.m. This contractor is qualified, but has bid higher than the other equally qualified bidders. Do you think that this government employee will spend more of the government's money to assure that she doesn't have to spend another \$100 of her own money? Oh, yes!

I'm the smartest, yes I am! Some people just have to make sure that everybody knows they are the smartest person in the room. I often begin my class discussions about this WIIFM by saying, "The customers from hell often have the same first name. That name is Doctor." You've undoubtedly dealt with this type before: Everyone else in the room has introduced themselves as Sarah, or Bill, or Jane, or Mike, but this person says "I'm Dr. . . ." Suppose you have a prospective government client whose first name is "Doctor," but he, or she, got a PhD from a second-tier college. You, however, are proposing to bring in two PhDs from Stanford, one from MIT, and two from Harvard to work on this project. What are the chances that you will be hired? Not very good, all other things being equal.

Other WIIFMs. Some people need to dominate others. I know clients who can't stand being bored and will create issues where there were none. I have often encountered customers with a seemingly bottomless need for attention and recognition. You need to identify the WIIFMs of your prospective customers (and current customers, for that matter), so that your proposals can be framed in terms of your customers' real needs.

During the time I was working on this book, I called a business owner who is an occasional client just to make contact. When I casually asked "How are you today?" he responded, "I'd rather be on the golf course." After we hung up, I realized he's said something like that fairly often of late. Now, as someone who wants to do business with him, what does that tell me about him? If he really has reached the point where his business has just become the means to an end rather than something he loves, if he really would rather be on the golf course most days, then I definitely need to adjust my approach. Because while I might be able to get him to do a lot of things, if they free him up to get out on the course, I don't know anymore how much I can get him to do if it keeps him away from golf, even if it increases his business by 10%. If I want more of his business in the future, I need to reevaluate his WIIFMs.

Never underestimate self-interest. As much as it dominates love, politics, and business, so does it dominate government contracting.

EXERCISE 4

Spend some time trying to identify the WIIFMs of those around you. Then make a list:

- Your WIIFMs
- Your current customer's WIIFMs
- Your boss's WIIFMs
- A staffer's WIIFMs

— *AXIOM* —

Self-interest calls the shots.

