

# When Opportunity Knocks, Will You Be Prepared?

by Craig Boswell

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## *It was a dark and stormy night . . .*

*Suddenly, a portly, middle-aged developer burst into my office. "Are you the babysitter?" he barked.*

*As I stood up, graham cracker crumbs fell to the floor. "Yes. Well, not exactly," I stuttered. "We don't consider child care as babysitting," I said, surprisingly bold.*

*"That doesn't matter," he roared. "I'm here because I've heard you're the best in town, and I have a business proposition for you."*

"Please come in and sit down," I murmured while my tongue searched for the last graham cracker crumb. "Oh, sorry, let me move that xylophone. I've been meaning to fix it for the last three weeks," I giggled, in a manner reminiscent of my seven year old daughter.

"Boswell," he said without introduction or salutation, "I'm developing the largest research park this county has ever seen. I have contractual commitments with eight out of twelve large, and I mean large, companies. But the county commissioners are demanding that I provide some amenity parks, with tennis courts and walking paths. They also wanted a day care center," he said in disgust.

"Child care," I said. "We prefer to be called a child care center, not day care."

"That doesn't matter," he roared. "I've heard you're the best in town."

"And you have a business proposition?" I interjected.

"Well . . . yes, that's right," he stumbled with his thoughts. "I'll build this center the way you want it, and CAM charges from the big boys will help pay for your rent."

I was too intimidated to ask what CAM was and who the big boys were. (I found out later that CAM stands for Common Area Maintenance Fee. I think then it should be

called CAMF. The big boys referred to the research companies that would be building or leasing the property.)

"So, Boswell, I need an operations proposal with technical and management procedures with a three-year projection. The county has established a review subcommittee that will oversee the proposal review. Oh, yes, they have a consulting company to review the child care issues and the total PUD (Plan Unit Development)."

"Hold it," I bellowed. "You'll have to go a lot slower. This is new ground, and I'm used to single digits and three-letter words."

He laughed, and the corners of his mouth reached to the bottom of his ears. "I don't have time now, but here's my card. Come over to the office where I can explain in detail what I need," he said. "What time can you come next Thursday?" he asked.

"I can come during nap time," I stated without thinking. "One-thirty," I responded after realizing what I had just said.

"Great! I will look forward to discussing this matter in detail with

you, Boswell. It has been nice talking to you." He left quicker than he had arrived.

I sat quietly for about ten minutes. Then I began looking for my package of graham crackers.

The developer had presented me with a unique challenge — how to write a proposal in a manner that developers, commissioners, and consultants could understand. More importantly, how would I write a proposal that I could understand?

## Understanding the Proposal

RFP (Request for Proposal) usually comes in written form, ranging in length from 1 to 101 pages. It is a document that outlines a problem and solicits proposals that explain how that problem can be solved. If the problem is how, when, where, and at what cost to establish a child care in the new area, the response could have many sections, and it could take weeks to complete.

An important point to make in the "art" of proposal writing is that most RFP readers are looking for a clean, well-written document that simply tells them what they want to know.

## Things You Need

- ✓ Space to work
- ✓ Uninterrupted time
- ✓ Typewriter/word processor
- ✓ Binding machine and device
- ✓ Copy machine
- ✓ Resource files
- ✓ Calculator or computer
- ✓ Independent reviewer
- ✓ Vision and insight

Many proposal books and seminars advocate a team approach to proposal writing. My experience dictates that team members get in the way and ask stupid questions. My recommendation, therefore, is to sit down with the door shut and have a clear outline (along with a box of graham crackers). Then go for it!

The basic elements of your proposal should stand out when the document is completed. For example:

1. The proposal should be neat, clean, and easy to read.
2. Jargon should be eliminated. Terminology should be defined so the reviewer (builder) knows clearly what you intend by using certain words.
3. Communicate your message without putting the reader in a stupor.
4. Your language should communicate your enthusiasm for this project. Be positive.
5. Use supported assumptions:
  - a. describe your organization clearly
  - b. document the need in context, by describing how the "national issues of quality child care" relate to local efforts
  - c. use tables and graphs sparingly and when you do employ them be sure headings clearly explain what is being presented

## Outline

- 1.0 **Executive Summary**
- 1.1 Introduction letter
- 1.2 Board of directors' letter (optional)
- 1.3 History statement

1.4 Management commitment statement

## 2.0 Technical Section

- 2.1 History
- 2.2 Management team with organization chart
- 2.3 Administrative policy
- 2.4 Management challenge statement
- 2.5 Time line
- 2.6 Early childhood quality guideline

## 3.0 Management Section

- 3.1 Personal and compensation package and job description
- 3.2 Staffing ratios, staff supervision, and staff retention
- 3.3 Inservice training guidelines and professional advancement
- 3.4 Program information
- 3.5 Philosophy overview
- 3.6 Curriculum statement
- 3.7 Explanation of daily curriculum
- 3.8 Center/parent relationships
- 3.9 Health and safety
- 3.10 Children with disability condition statement
- 3.11 Food program and procedures/menu
- 3.12 References (at least five)
- 3.13 Personal resume

## 4.0 Cost Section

- 4.1 Marketing plan
- 4.2 Budget/item description
- 4.3 Equipment/supply cost
- 4.4 Proforma — three year projection
- 4.5 Sample of parent tuition, handbook, registration
- 4.6 Schedule for obtaining licenses and insurance with cost breakdown

## 5.0 Appendix

- 5.1 Sample of parent handouts
- 5.2 Sample of infant information sheets
- 5.3 Sample of newspaper clipping of school's program
- 5.4 Sample of medication authorization forms

- 5.5 Sample of school/teacher evaluation forms
- 5.6 Sample of posted preschool curriculum outline

This article does not afford me the capability to describe in detail the subtopics of each section outlined above. However, I will briefly review a few.

**1.4 — Management commitment statement** is a subtopic that pledges your expertise to long-term operations, realizing your past experience and future goals in early childhood education and child care operations. Furthermore, it acknowledges the tremendous challenges that lie ahead in the planning, start-up, and long-term operations.

Details and concerns can be elaborated upon — e.g., “Our experience has determined that organizations outside the scope of early childhood education have a difficult and costly time of setting up, operating, and maintaining the type of quality center they envision. A management team that is educated, trained, and experienced can cut through the problems that arise and focus their energy and resources in maintaining the elements that are associated with quality, staff training, low teacher turnover, and a low child to teacher ratio.”

**2.3 — Administrative policy.** This section allows for explanation on multiple site operation and the manner of hiring, training, and supervision of middle management and faculty staff — e.g., “During the start-up phase, the executive director will be on site, hiring, training, and supervising the teachers. The on-site director will be trained at our nearest child care center under current child care management. The hiring and training will occur well in advance of children’s entering the school. After the school is operating

satisfactorily, the executive director will maintain an inservice education, monitoring, parent-board participation schedule that is satisfactory to both the staff and the parents and the parent advisory council.”

**3.2 — Issues regarding ratio, supervision, and retention** will always be foremost on a reviewer’s mind. You must provide details on how your child care company can provide solutions to these significant concerns — e.g., “Although the staff turnover rate is a natural issue as it relates to child care, our child care has had the fortunate opportunity to retain most of the staff throughout all its center(s).” The retention is achieved through the following reasons:

- ✓ Higher salaries than the local average.
  - ✓ Insurance benefits — health, life, dental, and maternity.
  - ✓ Staff child care at a significantly reduced rate. Food is provided free while staff is working.
  - ✓ Paid vacation and ten days for major holidays during the year.
  - ✓ Creative expression through involvement in curriculum.
  - ✓ Inservice training and recognition of completed tasks.
  - ✓ Involvement with an organization where the primary directive is to provide the best learning and caring environment possible for young children.
- 4.4 — Proforma** (budget) and three projections are critical information for any developer or banker, but most important for the financial feasibility of the new center. The proforma is used to illustrate the connection between child ratio, ✓

teacher salary, staff benefits, cost of living, and parent tuition. Remember to factor in cost of living increase for the staff/faculty and parent tuition increases throughout the next three years.

## General Proposal Checklist

1. Acknowledge receipt of the RFP to developer.
2. Determine qualification and commitments.
3. Consult informally with board of directors, trustees, owners, or husband/wife, etc. to determine your commitment to the new project.
4. Make copies of RFP (used for working copy).
5. Make formal presentation to decision makers in your organization.
6. Decision makers’ — e.g., board, trustee, owners, etc. — signatures of support.
7. Plan response time and deadline.
8. Identify and allocate supplies and support.
9. Outline RFP tasks.
10. Secure work space.
11. Develop proposal writing and assembly schedule.

## Proposal Writing Checklist

- ✓ Cover letter
- ✓ Letter of support from “decision maker”
- ✓ Table of contents
- ✓ Executive summary

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Technical section

✓ Management section

✓ Cost section

✓ Appendix

One final thought: Always use the over-night express mail (I use Federal Express). They keep terrific records on time, date, receiving signatures, etc. That doesn't mean that you need to wait until one day before the deadline. However, I've never met a time-compulsive early childhood educator. But you and I both know if it weren't for deadlines, taxes, payroll, board reports, and RFPs would all be sitting on our office floor with the xylophones.

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