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I'm often asked, "What's the difference between compliance and responsiveness? Does it matter?"

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Today we're going to discuss the often-confusing difference between compliance and responsiveness. I had to research this topic the first time someone asked, and I often found conflicting answers. Many of the "experts" were just as confused as I was.

COMPLIANCE VERSUS RESPONSIVENESS

Let's begin with some definitions. Compliance means strict adherence to the prospect's bid request, both the submittal instructions and the requirements.

Responsiveness means addressing the prospect's underlying needs. Proposals can be responsive but not compliant, compliant but not responsive, both, or neither. Confusion reigns. Let's go a little deeper.

Compliance with instructions means that you have followed the requested format; answered all questions; completed all forms; and submitted your response on time, to the right person, at the right place. Compliance with requirements means that you have agreed to meet all requirements as asked in the bid request.

FOCUSING ON COMPLIANCE

So why not just focus on being compliant and forget about being responsive? What could go wrong?

If you are a fan of NPR's Car Talk, as I am, then you'll be familiar with this scenario. Your car seems to be pulling to the right, so you take your car to the shop and ask them to align your wheels. An hour later, you pay \$59.95 for the wheel alignment, drive away, and your car continues to pull to the right. When you return to complain, your mechanic assures you that they correctly aligned your wheels as requested.

What went wrong?

You have a responsiveness problem. Your mechanic was compliant but not responsive. Your underlying need was to have your car steer straight, but you misdiagnosed the problem, and the compliant solution didn't fix your problem. You're at fault, (because you asked for the wrong service), and your mechanic was compliant but unlikely to continue to be your mechanic.

You both suffered because the solution was not responsive. Your mechanic loses future revenue, and you still have a problem. (Plus you're down \$59.95).

With this example, we have illustrated the concept of misunderstood expectations and added value, which will be explored in a future podcast. Your expectation

was that the mechanic, who should be an expert, would fix your steering problem. Your mechanic, afraid to be seen as “padding the bill”, overestimated your expertise and did exactly as you asked. Here, added value is the value that you place on a professional mechanic that takes the time to ask a few questions, correctly diagnose, and fix your steering problem, versus the technician who competently aligned your wheels, as asked, but didn’t solve your problem.

COMPLIANCE AS A WEAPON

Much like Pat Benatar sang about the media using sex as a weapon, we hear losers complaining about buyers that use compliance as a weapon. First, understand that government buyers, bound by law, and organizational buyers, often guided by their own regulations, are required to follow their defined buying processes. Government buyers who fail to follow their process are open to protests, and can be ordered to start over. Other buyers might simply be reprimanded.

Here are some reasons buyers insist on compliance:

- Sometimes they’re afraid of protests, which can delay the purchase, take a lot of time to handle, and are personally embarrassing.
- Sometimes they fear being reprimanded by superiors for a late procurement and negative publicity. A 2008 example is the Boeing protest of the tanker contract that was awarded to Airbus.
- And sometimes buyers just need an acceptable justification to eliminate a bid because they don’t like the bidder, don’t like the price, don’t like the solution, or have enough compliant bids to provide adequate competition.

So the best advice about compliance is to not let lack of compliance be an excuse to eliminate your bid. Deciding to submit a noncompliant bid should be a conscious part of your winning strategy, and not an accident.

RESPONSIVENESS AS A WINNING STRATEGY

Let’s look at an example of a noncompliant, responsive, winning solution.

To maintain a positive public image, Bubba’s Bar-B-Q needs the grass around their restaurant maintained at an acceptable height. So Bubba’s issues a request for proposals, specifying weekly grass cutting by push mower for 1 year.

Bubba’s gets three bids:

1. Bidder A offers to cut the grass weekly with a push mower for 52 weeks, even though the grass might be dormant in snowy winter or dry summer months. Bidder A is offering a compliant, non-responsive solution.
2. Bidder B offers to use a push mower, but to cut the grass only as needed. B offers to mow more often than weekly in the spring when grass grows rapidly, but eliminate mowing when the grass is dormant, thus reducing the total lawn cutting cost.

Bidder B is compliant with the method, noncompliant on the cutting interval, but responsive to the underlying appearance need.

3. Bidder C offers to use a robot mowing system that senses grass height and cuts as necessary, thus keeping the lawn at the desired level but reducing the mowing frequency and perhaps the total cost. Robots can be expensive.

Bidder C is noncompliant on the method, but responsive to appearance needs. However, is there some reason for Bubba's "push mower" requirement? Could the robot mower pose safety issues? Does Bubba want to promote full employment? By "push mower," did Bubba's mean a manually powered push mower aligned with a desired "green, low-carbon-footprint" public image?

As this example illustrates, deciding whether to be fully compliant and responsive is an implicit question when determining your solution and strategy. You'd better understand Bubba's issues.

So let's review. Being compliant means doing exactly what the prospect asks, following both the submittal instructions and agreeing to meet the requirements. Being responsive means proposing a solution that meets their underlying needs, that solves their problem. You can be compliant, responsive, neither, or both. Deciding whether to be compliant or responsive is implicit in your solution and win strategy.

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That's all. Thanks for listening.

REFERENCES

Note: Definitions of compliance and responsiveness differ within the business development community, as you will see in these references. Some authors use them as synonyms. Several of the following sources discuss why and how to prepare compliance/response matrices, which was beyond the content of this podcast.

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