

# BUSINESS PROPOSAL BLUEPRINT



*“A step by step guide to writing  
winning business proposals.”*

Revision 3. By Vusi Sindane

## Intro...

It all began with selling airtime at school when I was 14-years-old. Almost twenty years later, with many scars, trials and tribulations, I find myself in a team of people I barely knew five years ago trying to raise a billion Rands to build schools and other properties.

My time in business has made me appreciate a simple yet profoundly powerful fact. Nothing happens until someone is convinced that it is in their best interest to work with you. Whether you're selling airtime, convincing someone to join your company, or raising money; influence is the ultimate equaliser.

But how do you influence a person you've never met? In fact, how do you convince them to meet you in the first place? How do you influence a group of people who may have a wide range of interests? How do you sell your ideas and convince those around you to buy into them?

My secret weapon of influence, which I started using in 2005 when I sold timetabling software to schools, is writing proposals and letters. I've wrote hundreds of proposals, many of which failed. At one point, I gave up writing proposals altogether but the people I wanted to do business with always demanded them. It was frustrating! I simply had no idea what to put in a business proposal, what to leave out, and how to organise my thoughts.

## The Business Proposal Blueprint

I had a bad attitude toward writing proposals. This continued until I came across a workshop by Gary Halbert, a guru in copywriting and marketing, who said: “You are one sales letter away from making your next million.” At the time, I was flat broke and staying in a remote town where I hardly knew anybody, so I figured there was no harm in learning how to persuade people on paper, which is what a proposal is. I read mountains of books and research in sales, marketing, psychology and even personal development, trying to find a gem that would solve all of my problems.

For me, the biggest insight was that ‘there’s no one thing’ that can make proposals magically successful 100% of the time. If there was, human nature would lose its mystery and life would be like watching a boring movie over and over again. The good news, however, is that there are very few things you need to know that will significantly improve the success of your business proposals. One of them is that we all have biases as human beings, many of which we don’t even know about. We all tend to make decisions that reinforce our biases, while we try to avoid things that contradict them. These biases, therefore, make up the blueprint of our thinking and decision-making process. In short, understanding your reader’s biases is the beginning of writing a business proposal.

Here are a few examples of biases:

Consider a woman who falls pregnant for the first time. The likelihood is that she will start buying baby magazines and consuming all content that has to do with pregnancy and parenting. Consider a young man who just landed a new job. The likelihood is that they will go out of their way to impress their new boss and colleagues. Lastly, consider a man in his fifties who just lost his childhood friend. The likelihood is that everything they do will have a renewed sense of urgency, and they will talk about legacy.

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The underlying principle is that biases influence behaviour including purchasing decisions. Therefore, if you stop reading this book and invest all of your time to try and figure out what drives a person's behaviour, you would still derive more value than a person that writes proposals every day without understanding what drives their reader.

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## House Keeping

Learning does not happen when we acquire new information. Instead, it happens when we try something new. With that in mind, you will do yourself a great disservice if you read this book and thereafter do nothing. Rather, consider this a guidebook, try the things I recommend and then make up your own mind about what works and what doesn't.

This book is designed to achieve two primary goals: (i) to help you deconstruct important principles about writing proposals; and (ii) guide you through action steps that will help you internalise the process of writing powerful proposals.

Each chapter introduces an idea and ends with a project that you must complete which enables you to learn and apply your knowledge in the real world. The projects are difficult to do; they will cost you money, time and effort to complete properly. Also note that the projects are designed to be more effective if you work on them with a friend, your boss or a colleague.

Unfortunately, this is not a shortcut, rather it is a roadmap. You still have to travel the winding and often difficult path to achieve mastery. The only difference is that, unlike some of us who had to learn by trial and error, you will know where you are in your journey.

## Part 1: Thinking

"Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably the reason why so few engage in it". - **Henry Ford**

## Chapter 1: Salesmanship on Paper

A proposal is nothing but a salesman on paper. Instead of sitting face-to-face with a client, we send a proposal to sit mind-to-mind with them.

You will become more effective at writing proposals if you do two things: (i) invest in learning and understanding human behaviour; and (ii) invest in sitting with people face-to-face to understand their natural biases and things that drive them in their decision making process.

Here's how to get started:

### **PROJECT 1: Record your next sales meeting.**

1. Use your phone to record your next sales meeting, pitch or presentation. Then ask a friend to do the same (with their own meeting, pitch or presentation).
2. After the meetings, swap your recordings and listen to how well the other person did.
3. Make notes of what you think was good and what you think was bad about their presentation.
4. Compare notes and have an honest discussion with your friend about where you think they can improve.
5. Do this again 3 times.

**NB:** Remember the house-keeping rules: Learning only happens when you've tried something and arrive at your own conclusions about what works and what doesn't. Secondly, learning is far more effective when you do it with a friend. Therefore, share this book with a friend, a colleague or a boss and work on these projects together. It will be a lot of fun.



## Chapter 2: The Rat in the Room

In 2016, we were conned out of R136,000. It all happened on the phone over a period of two weeks. We received a request to supply goods to a mine in Zimbabwe. We went into a frenzy to source the goods and found a company that could supply us. Meanwhile, that “supplier” was actually part of the con, and after we paid for the goods, they vanished. We only realised after they disappeared that the alarming signs were everywhere and we did not see them. It was a black swan event.

This story alludes to an important insight. People that desperately want to get something done do not think or behave rationally. They will do whatever it takes to solve the problem (or get what they want); and in looking for a solution, they will narrowly focus on certain cues, most of which are created by their own biases. In most cases, you can even have the best solution for them but if you fail to resonate with those biases, you will lose the deal.

Here’s an analogy:

Let’s say you are sleeping in the middle of the night. Suddenly you feel a little scratch on your leg and you brush it off while still deep in your sleep. Then after a few minutes, the scratch comes back. This time you kick it off, turn to face the other way and pull the blankets over your head. Then the scratch comes back but this time you’re completely fed up! So, you kick off the blankets and turn on the lights to find out what’s going on. Then you see a huge rat and pieces of your blanket and nails all over your bed. Let’s assume you’re afraid of rats. What do you do?

OKAY, HOLD THAT THOUGHT.

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At that very moment, what's the most important thing to you? Is it your presentation that you were preparing for tomorrow? Is it your debts? Is it your car? No! None of the above. The only thing that matters at that moment is getting rid of that rat.

The rat could be anything:

- a housebreaking,
- losing a loved one,
- the threat of being fired,
- losing money,
- crashing a car,
- dropping a phone and cracking your screen,
- having your laptop stolen...

There are countless examples of things that represent “the rat in the room” and when any of them happen, life stops and we get into fight or flight mode.

Similarly to the analogy, the secret to writing a powerful proposal is finding “**the rat in the room.**” In real terms, this will be a narrative that is in your prospect's mind. The biggest insight I've ever discovered about writing proposals is that finding the rat in the room is actually 80% of the job.

### HOW TO FIND THE RAT IN THE ROOM

To help you understand what happens in a person's mind when they have a problem, I will use a model that was developed by a game-changing brain scientist, Dr. Paul MacLean. He coined the concept of the Triune Brain Theory, which posits that we (Human Beings) have three brains in one. The diagram below provides a simplified representation of his model:

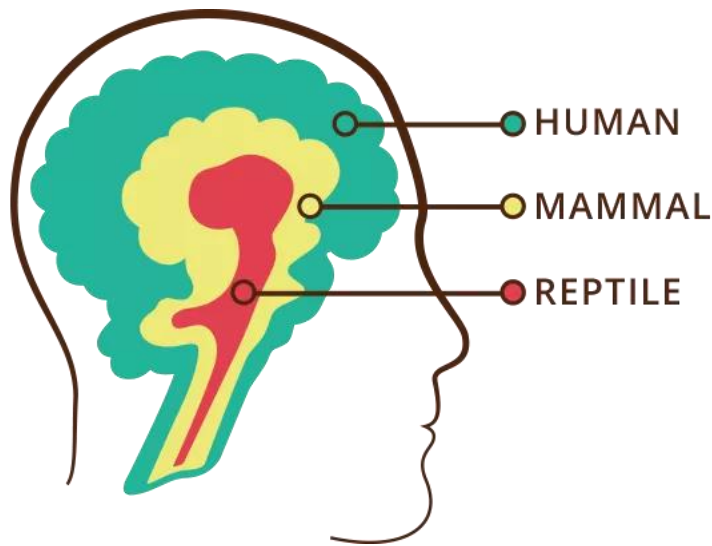


Image Source: (pureaffair.com, 2018)

### **Reptilian Brain**

The reptilian brain is solely concerned with survival. All of our basic instincts including fight or flight, our sex drive, appetite, regulating our heartbeats and body temperature (to name a few) are part of our survival toolkit, and they are controlled by the reptilian brain, in most cases involuntarily.

### **Emotional Brain**

The emotional brain, on the other hand, is mostly concerned with belonging. Our emotional brains constructs a self-identity then decides on who or what to associate or disassociate ourselves with. For example, if you identify yourself as an entrepreneur, you will behave and associate yourself with everything entrepreneurial. But, you will disassociate yourself or find it very difficult to do anything that is not entrepreneurial, e.g. working for someone else.

### **Rational / Logical / Human Brain**

The rational brain is primarily concerned with interpretation. For instance, the words you are reading are really just symbols, and they could mean absolutely nothing. However, our brains help us interpret them into meaningful ideas. We also use the rational brain to see into the future and develop plans to achieve goals, most of which are just means to make the other two brains happier anyway.

### **Relationship Between the Brains**

Dr. MacLean's research highlights a strange relationship between the three brains. As you have seen, the reptilian brain is interested in survival, the emotional brain is interested in belonging, and the rational brain is interested in interpretation and finding meaning in the world.

The three brains are all interested in three different things. Hence the relationship is like being in a board meeting where the finance manager is interested in cutting costs, the operations manager is interested in efficiency, and the marketing manager is interested in spending more money... it can become chaotic, and it usually is.

With further probing, Dr. MacLean found that these three brains have different levels of influence on the decisions we make on a day to day basis. The reptilian brain is the smallest and arguably the least sophisticated of the three, but it has the greatest influence on the things we do. On the other hand, the rational brain is the biggest and clearly the most sophisticated (in terms of its functions) but has the least amount of influence on what we eventually do.

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This may sound strange but it makes sense. Think about it this way: If you are crossing the road and a car suddenly comes out of nowhere, you shouldn't be worrying about how important you are in society (emotions), or worrying about what on earth the driver is thinking or whether his breaks are good enough to stop the car before it hits you (rational), you just need to jump out of the road (survival)! Thus, the reptilian brain can override all three brains.

In keeping with this analogy, once you are safe on the side of the road then you will start thinking about other people; be it family, friends, colleagues or the idiot that almost hit you. This is the emotional brain doing its bit.

Then a few hours or days later, you may find yourself thinking about what could have happened; how lucky you are; or how you could have prevented the whole incident by not being busy with WhatsApp while you were crossing the road. This is the rational brain functioning.

The point of all this is quite simple. The rational brain is always last in line, in terms of the amount of influence we have on the things we do. On the other hand, the reptilian brain can always veto any mental process to ensure that we stay alive.

### **WHAT DO PROPOSALS HAVE TO DO WITH THIS?**

The rat in the room is a situation that triggers the reptilian brain and puts us in survival mode. As you've seen, there's absolutely nothing rational about a person that is in this state of mind. All they want is for their pain to go away (or their greed to pay off as soon as possible). Hence your first task when writing a proposal is to find out what that rat in the room is, and what it looks like in your customers' eyes, because if you can show them that you know what they are going through, then 80% of the battle is won.

## TOOLS FOR FINDING THE RAT IN THE ROOM

Here's a tool you can use to suss out your prospect's state of mind:



As you get into discussions with your prospect, try and figure out whether they are still thinking about their problem (being rational); or whether they have started displaying elements of emotional biases e.g. “What will my boss think if I...”; or find out if they are actively trying to solve their problem e.g. they are spending money or time looking for or trying out a solution.

Here's another way of putting it: A (monogamously) married person that cheats on their partner is at the ACTION stage; a 50-year-old politician that is still thinking, “What will people if I appear on social media with a 22-year-old in bed” is at the EMOTIONAL stage; and a bachelor who can turn a blind eye on a red hot mini-skirt, heels, a push-up bra and cologne that changes the colour of trees is still safe within the RATIONAL realm of the three brains.

## HOW TO USE THE THINK>FEEL>ACT TOOL

You've probably guessed that there's no need to hard sell to a person that is in the ACTION stage because they will already be sold. All you need to do is show up with a solution that looks like what they have in their minds.

On the other hand, a cold prospect, or a person that is still RATIONALISING about their problem will be significantly more difficult to sell to unless you find a way of moving them towards the ACTION stage.

**ASK YOURSELF, “WHAT’S THE REAL ISSUE?”**

Let’s consider the case of a husband who buys his wife an expensive car. The rational story could be that he wants his wife to have a car. The emotional, underlying story could be that he did something behind closed doors and feels guilty. The survival story could be that he doesn’t want to lose his children (because of something he did maybe – and got caught) and is using the car to keep his wife happy or less hostile.

I know I’m using stereotypical examples but the point I am trying to make is that there’s no magic tool you can use to find the rat in the room. In fact, people are usually protective over their burning issues and only reveal them to close confidants. This means you have to do a lot of work to get into the inner-circle of whoever you want to do serious business with.

Be that as it may, you can use the THINK, FEEL, ACT framework to get a sense of how deep the relationship is with your prospect and how ready your prospect is to act on the issues they have.

<p><b>PROJECT 2: Analyse your meeting</b></p> <p>Assuming you’ve done the first project with a friend, listen to the recordings again. This time see if you can answer the questions below on your friend’s behalf. Once you’ve answered the questions, rate the quality of the answers out of three (3) where:</p> <p>1 = not sure   2 = fair enough   3 = clearly understood.</p>	
<p>What is your [friend’s] prospect’s rational story about the problem they have?</p>	<p>___ / 3</p>

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Who else cares about your [friend's] prospect's problem and how does this affect their relationship with that person or people?	__ / 3
What are the consequences of not solving the problem?	__ / 3
Total	__ / 9



## Chapter 3: The Smoking Gun

The phrase “Smoking Gun” comes from the Sherlock Holmes series and refers to the idea of finding a gun that was recently fired (and still smoking) on a person who is suspected to have killed someone. A smoking gun is an incontrovertible piece of evidence or information.

When writing a proposal, your smoking gun will be new information that very few people know about. Finding a smoking gun makes your proposal virtually impossible to ignore.

### EXAMPLE OF A SMOKING GUN

After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941, almost all the American battleships were destroyed. In fact, there were only two aircraft carriers and submarines left. On the other hand, the Japanese army had a whole fleet of battleships and aircraft carriers, which had the fastest and most agile planes during the war. But somehow, the Americans were able to beat the Japanese in all of the next few battles, even in that disadvantaged state. How?

The U.S army had been working on technology to intercept and decrypt Japanese communication. They knew everything that the Japanese were working on, hence they were able to intercept, confuse and destroy them.

In the context of writing proposals, your smoking gun will almost always make or break the deal. Without a smoking gun, you will effectively be cold-calling and most of your proposals will end up in the bin. But with a smoking gun, you will be able to pull a warship with a single strand of pubic hair.

## CASE STUDY: FINDING THE SMOKING GUN

I recently had a meeting with an engineering company that wanted to sell 51% of their business. Just to give a bit of context, the business was founded by an engineer who had 55 years' experience (basically his whole life), and over the years, his sons had joined the company; but now the company was struggling.

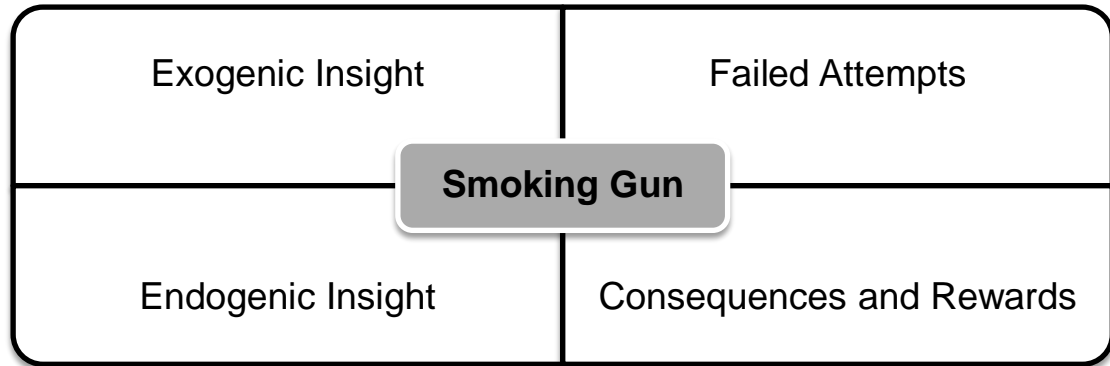
The first part of the meeting was their pitch; they were talking about their experience, their expertise, their order books, and all the good stuff. But no one just sells 51% of a business unless there's a rat in the room.

So, I started off by sniffing out the rat in the room. I asked them, *"If we do not buy your business what will happen?"* From that question alone, they told me about how squeezed they are financially, the history of the business, and the fact that they once had 120 employees and were now down to 12. Their business was struggling and they needed a black partner to help bring in new business from the government. The government and all of their previous clients now require them to have black partners (in line with the Black Economic Empowerment Policies) for them to get new business. Be that as it may, we were still having a rational discussion.

Then I turned to one of the gentlemen, who happened to be the son of the founder (who was also there). I said, *"So you want to keep this business going because you don't want to let your father down?"* His eyes turned red and he almost broke down in tears, telling me about how passionate he was about the business, and how as a young boy he used to open the factory at six in the morning. He also mentioned that they tried to get into partnership with other people, who didn't really add value to the business. He carried on until his father stopped him. I had my smoking gun – keep reading to find out why:

## SMOKING GUNS MATRIX

Here's a tool you can use to determine a piping hot smoking gun:



A smoking gun is all about insights. An insight is a valuable piece of information that clarifies the true nature of things. There are four categories of insights that you can put together to find a piping hot smoking gun.

### - EXOGENIC INSIGHTS

Exogenic refers to forces that work outside the surface of the earth. In this case, outside of the business. To discover an exogenic insight you can scan for the following:

- Political forces: How does the political environment affect the business?
- Social and cultural forces: How do social norms or emergent changes affect the business?
- Demographic forces: How is the population organised and how does this affect the business?
- Geographic forces: How does the landscape, weather or distance between things affect the business?
- Technological forces: How do people respond to technology? Is there new technology in the market that's changing how things work?

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- Economic forces: Where is the wealth and how is it distributed? How does this affect the business?

It is not necessary to be pedantic about what each of these forces are doing as it could get laborious. However, it's important to find the pimples; the forces that just stick out and clearly influence how things work.

### - ENDOGENIC INSIGHTS

Endogenic refers to forces inside the surface of the earth and similarly, inside the business. According to Josh Kaufman, in his book *The Personal MBA*, every business has five pillars. If anyone of them cracks, the business becomes painful to keep afloat.

Based on his findings, you should scan for the following:

- Value Creation: Are the products or services offered by the business relevant?
- Marketing: Does the business have a system for finding prospects?
- Sales: What is the revenue and the sales pipeline of the business?
- Operations: Does the business deliver consistent quality?
- Accounting: Is the business making money, and is it worth it for the shareholders?

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### - FAILED ATTEMPTS

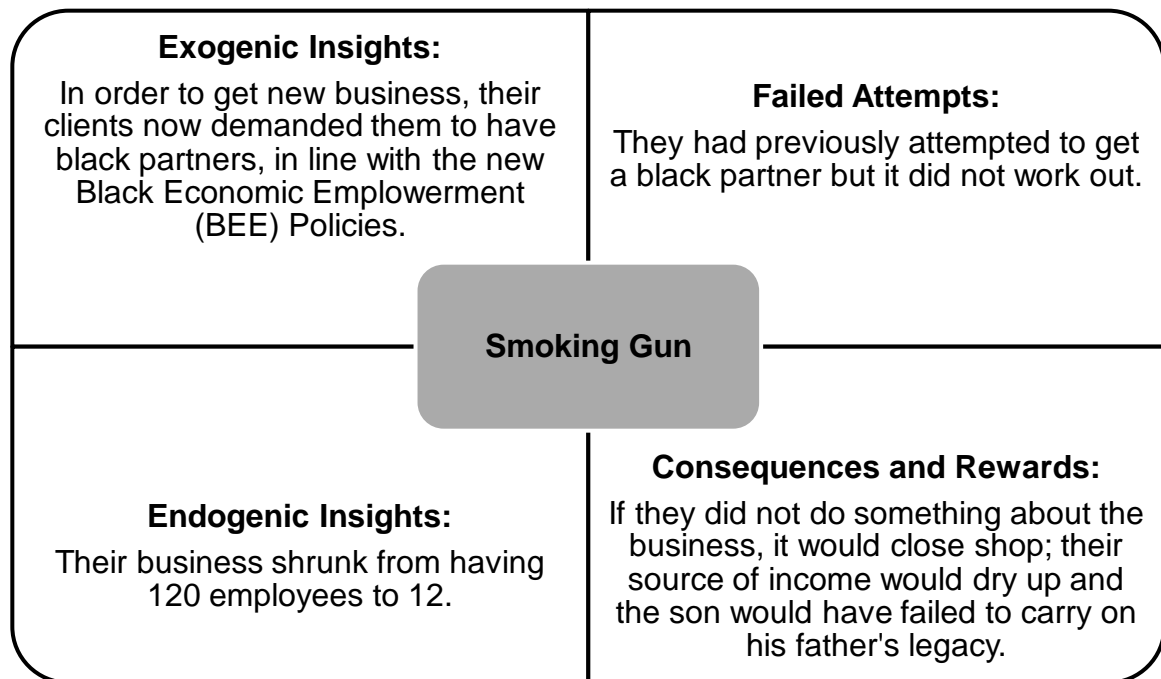
In line with the lessons in the previous chapter, it's important to find out whether your prospect has tried to solve their problem. If they have not yet spent money, time or effort trying to solve the problem (or pursue their goal), you will find it rather difficult to do anything with them. You will have to fight against their own ideas of how things are supposed to work, and this could become problematic. On the other hand, if they are already spending money to *unsuccessfully* solve their problem, they will be looking for an alternative solution. In finding your smoking gun, try and learn about their failure in solving a recurring problem.

### - CONSEQUENCES AND REWARDS

It's also important to understand what the consequences would be if your prospect does not solve the problem. Similarly what would the rewards be if they do solve the problem? In trying to uncover these, try to figure out who will enforce those consequences and rewards; is it a boss? Is it a wife? Is it relatives? Is it the press?

### CASE STUDY: CONTINUES...

Now that we have discussed what a smoking gun is, let's get back to the case study to find out why I said I found my smoking gun:



I gathered all of this information from the meeting, and we were ready to drop a bombshell of a proposal.

### PROJECT 3: FIND YOUR SMOKING GUN

Use the Smoking Gun Matrix to find your own smoking gun or an insight that will give you an incredible insight.

1. Set up another meeting with your client and ask your friend to do the same. Note that this could be a telephonic conversation.
2. This time design your questions to extract insights in the four quadrants of the smoking gun.
3. After the meeting, organise your notes using the tool I've shared.
4. Share your smoking gun with your friend and discuss it thoroughly to help each other improve.

## END OF SAMPLE, BUT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW JOURNEY

Dear reader, you've come this far and I hope this is the beginning of our journey together.

There's another eight Chapters ready for you. All of them are designed to take you step by step through the process of building your next business proposal.

- **Chapter 4:** Takes you through the building blocks of your proposal; what to put in, how to organise it and what to leave out.
- **Chapter 5:** Walks you through the processing of converting bullet points into short, simple yet persuasive paragraphs.
- **Chapter 6:** Did you know that the highest paid magazine copywriters spend 80% of their time writing headings and sub-headings? Chapter six goes into detail about using headings to make your proposal easy to browse. This is the secret to avoid having your proposal thrown in the bin.
- **Chapter 7:** Most people go crazy over this chapter. It's all about pricing. How do you price your goods in a way that avoids haggling yet maximises your margins and profits?
- **Chapter 8:** This chapter looks into the psychology of influence and shows you how to apply some of the most effective principles that seasoned marketers use.

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- **Chapter 9:** This was first published in 2016 and since then there are a number of questions that readers asked. This chapter is an update in this revision and it gives you a front-row-seat of questions and answers that come from the book.
- **Chapter 10:** There's one last secret that you will find in this chapter. It's the one thing that I learned by mistake from one of my mentors and it changed my success rate forever.
- **Chapter 11:** This is the last chapter it gives you a final check-list. Before you send your proposal, go through the check-list to make sure that everything is done.

### The Road Construction Analogy

During a road construction, traffic becomes a nightmare and it takes forever to get anywhere. One option is to avoid the constructions, in which case nobody will be able to get anywhere when the roads finally collapse. Alternatively, we can be patient and make a small sacrifice for a much better road in future.

I hope this e-book will be your manual to construct a new path for writing effective business proposals.

Whenever you are ready. Please use the link below to buy the full book.

<https://learn.vusisindane.com/bpb>