

COMMUNICATION

The Human Edge: Oral Presentations as the Antidote to AI-Generated Proposals in Business

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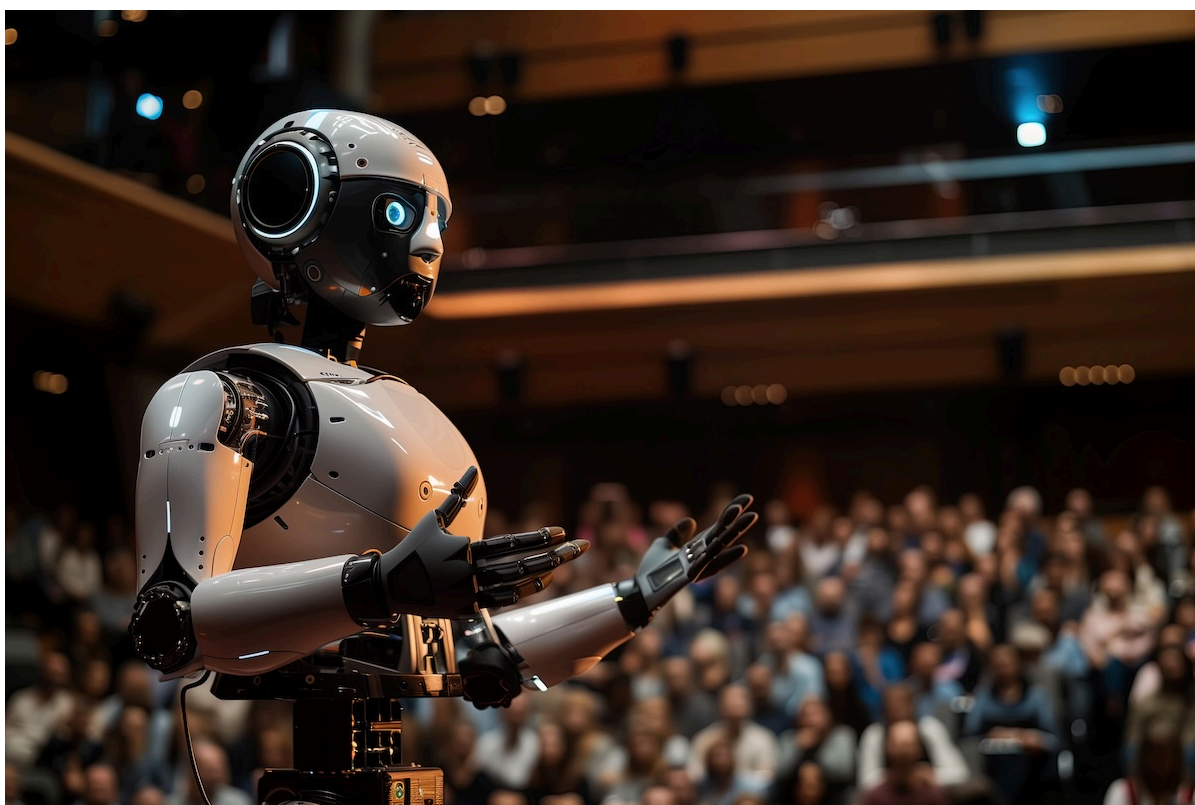


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Overcome AI generated noise with human-centric business proposals.

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In an era where artificial intelligence can generate polished, comprehensive business proposals at the click of a button, business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-government (B2G) procurement teams face a new challenge: how to differentiate genuine capability and understanding from well-crafted but potentially hollow submissions. As procurement offices are inundated with AI-generated proposals, a powerful yet underutilized tool emerges as the solution: oral presentations.

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The Rise of AI in Proposal Writing

The advent of advanced language models like GPT-4 and Claude3.5 Sonnet has revolutionized the way companies approach proposal writing. These AI systems can generate coherent, well-structured proposals in a fraction of the time it would take a human team. For businesses, especially smaller firms with limited resources, this technology levels the playing field, allowing them to compete with larger, more established companies in terms of proposal quality and comprehensiveness.

However, this AI-driven approach comes with a significant downside for procurement teams. As more companies leverage AI to craft their proposals, the submissions become increasingly homogeneous. Contracting officers are left to sift through reams of technically proficient but often soulless proposals, struggling to discern which companies truly understand the project requirements and have the genuine capability to deliver.

The Power of Real-Time Human Interaction

Oral presentations offer a dynamic, interactive platform that AI simply cannot replicate. While AI excels at compiling information and formatting it into coherent written proposals, it lacks the ability to engage in real-time dialogue, demonstrate genuine understanding, and adapt on the fly. These human elements are precisely what make oral presentations so valuable in the modern procurement landscape.

We recently published a study in the *Journal of Contract Management* that sheds light on the potential of this underutilized tool. Although currently used in only 8% of source selections, oral presentations offer unique advantages that directly address the shortcomings of AI-generated content:

1. Demonstrating True Understanding

During an oral presentation, contractors can showcase their deep comprehension of the project requirements in ways that go beyond regurgitating the request for proposal (RFP) language – a common feature of AI-generated proposals. Presenters can:

- Articulate nuanced interpretations of the project goals
- Provide relevant examples from past experiences
- Offer innovative approaches tailored to the specific context

This level of engagement allows procurement teams to assess whether a contractor truly grasps the project's complexities or is simply adept at producing a polished written response.

2. Real-Time Problem Solving

One of the most powerful aspects of oral presentations is the opportunity for real-time problem solving. Procurement teams can present hypothetical scenarios or unexpected challenges, observing how potential contractors:

- Think on their feet
- Apply their expertise to novel situations
- Collaborate and brainstorm solutions in real-time

This dynamic interaction reveals critical thinking and adaptability skills that no AI-generated proposal can demonstrate.

3. Assessing Cultural Fit and Team Dynamics

Oral presentations provide a window into the human side of contracting. They allow procurement teams to:

- Observe team dynamics and communication styles
- Assess cultural fit with the buyer's organization
- Evaluate the expertise and roles of key personnel

These interpersonal factors, crucial for successful project execution, are impossible to gauge from a written proposal, regardless of how well-crafted it may be by AI.

4. Clarifying Ambiguities and Addressing Concerns

The interactive nature of oral presentations allows for immediate clarification of any ambiguities or concerns. This two-way communication:

- Reduces misunderstandings that could lead to contract disputes
- Allows contractors to address specific concerns or reservations
- Provides an opportunity for procurement teams to dig deeper into areas of particular interest

This real-time exchange of information leads to a more thorough and accurate evaluation than what's possible through static, AI-generated proposals.

5. Revealing Genuine Expertise and Passion

Oral presentations give contractors a platform to demonstrate their genuine expertise and passion for the project. Through their presentations, teams can:

- Share anecdotes and lessons learned from relevant past experiences
- Express enthusiasm and commitment to the project goals
- Showcase unique insights and innovative ideas

These human elements are difficult to fake and impossible for AI to replicate, providing a true differentiator in the evaluation process.

6. Adapting to Audience Engagement

Skilled presenters can read the room and adapt their presentation style and content based on the audience's reactions. This ability to:

- Emphasize points that resonate with the evaluation team
- Elaborate on areas that generate more interest or questions
- Adjust the technical depth based on the audience's level of understanding

Demonstrates a level of responsiveness and adaptability that static, AI-generated proposals cannot match.

The Limits of AI Disclosure Requirements

While some firms and agencies have begun to require disclosure of AI use in proposal generation, this approach alone is insufficient to determine best value. Simply knowing whether AI was involved in creating a proposal does not provide insight into a contractor's

true capabilities or understanding of the project. In fact, AI-generated content can be just as representative (or unrepresentative) of a company's abilities as proposals crafted by hired capture teams.

Many firms already outsource proposal writing to specialized capture teams who may not be directly involved in project execution. These teams are skilled at crafting compelling narratives and addressing RFP requirements, but their work doesn't necessarily reflect the day-to-day capabilities of the implementing team. Similarly, a company using AI to generate a proposal might still possess the expertise and resources to execute the project effectively. Conversely, a human-written proposal doesn't guarantee superior performance.

The key issue is not whether AI or humans wrote the proposal, but whether the submitting company truly understands the project requirements and has the capability to deliver. This is where oral presentations shine. They provide a dynamic, interactive platform for evaluators to probe beyond the written word - whether AI-generated or human-crafted - and assess the real-time problem-solving abilities, project understanding, and team dynamics that are crucial for successful project execution.

By focusing on oral presentations, agencies can move beyond the surface-level distinction of AI versus human authorship and delve into the substance of a contractor's capabilities. This approach allows for a more nuanced and accurate assessment of best value, cutting through the noise of polished proposals to reveal the true potential for project success.

Insights from the Research

Our study provides valuable insights into the current state and potential of oral presentations in public B2G procurement:

1. Reducing Uncertainty in Service Contracts

The research shows that buyers are more likely to use oral presentations when purchasing services rather than goods. This preference aligns with the inherent challenges of service procurement, which often involves intangible deliverables and greater performance uncertainty.

In an era where AI can easily generate detailed technical specifications for products, the ability to articulate and demonstrate service capabilities becomes a crucial differentiator. Oral presentations allow companies to showcase their understanding of the buyer's needs, their proposed approach, and the expertise of their key personnel in a way that AI-generated text simply cannot replicate.

2. Mitigating Protest Risk

The study found a marginally significant relationship between the use of oral presentations and high protest risk procurements. This finding suggests that face-to-face interactions can increase trust and transparency in the procurement process, potentially reducing the likelihood of bid protests.

As AI-generated proposals become more sophisticated, the risk of protests based on technical merits of written submissions may increase. Oral presentations offer a human touchpoint that can clarify misunderstandings, demonstrate commitment, and build rapport – factors that are difficult to protest and impossible for AI to replicate.

3. Facilitating Better Decision-Making

While the quantitative data didn't show a significant relationship between oral presentations and improved supplier performance or buyer satisfaction, the qualitative interviews painted a different picture. Procurement professionals consistently reported that oral presentations led to better decision-making and improved supplier performance.

This discrepancy suggests that the benefits of oral presentations may be more nuanced and context-dependent than previously thought. In an environment saturated with AI-generated content, the ability to directly question and interact with potential suppliers could prove invaluable in assessing true capabilities and cultural fit.

Overcoming Barriers to Adoption

Despite the potential benefits, the study revealed several barriers to the widespread adoption of oral presentations:

1. **Fear of Protests:** Many buyers expressed concern that oral presentations, if not meticulously conducted, could invite bid protests. This fear stems from the potential for unequal treatment of offerors or inadvertent disclosure of information during the presentations.
2. **Lack of Experience and Training:** Buyers reported feeling uncomfortable using oral presentations if they lacked prior experience or proper training in conducting them effectively.
3. **Resource Intensity:** Oral presentations require significant preparation and coordination from both buyers and sellers, which can be perceived as an additional burden in an already complex procurement process.

Strategies for Effective Implementation

To leverage oral presentations as a differentiating strategy in the age of AI, buying firms and contractors should consider the following approaches:

- 1. Develop Clear Guidelines:** Agencies should create comprehensive guidelines for conducting oral presentations, addressing common concerns such as maintaining fairness and avoiding inadvertent discussions. These guidelines can help alleviate buyers' fears of protests and provide a consistent framework for implementation. This should cover conducting presentations, asking probing questions, and evaluating responses. Evaluators should also prepare a consistent format and set of standard questions for all offerors, while reserving the right to ask additional questions as needed.
- 2. Invest in Training:** Both B2B and B2G buyers and industry professionals should receive training on effective oral presentation techniques. This training should cover not only the logistical aspects of conducting presentations but also strategies for asking probing questions and evaluating responses while providing fair opportunity to all offerors.
- 3. Leverage Technology:** While the goal is to cut through AI-generated noise, technology can still play a role in enhancing oral presentations. Video conferencing tools can reduce logistical challenges, while recording capabilities can aid in documentation and review processes. Include interactive elements like Q&A sessions or scenario-based questions to assess offerors' adaptability and depth of understanding.
- 4. Focus on Key Personnel:** Oral presentations offer a unique opportunity to assess the capabilities and dynamics of the team that will actually perform the work. Evaluators should structure oral presentation requirements to allow offerors to highlight key personnel and their specific roles in the project. Encourage offerors to highlight their unique strengths, innovative approaches, and value-added services that distinguish them from competitors.
- 5. Encourage Dialogue:** Rather than treating oral presentations as one-way information flows, buyers should use them as opportunities for meaningful dialogue. This approach can reveal a supplier's ability to think on their feet, adapt to changing

requirements, and collaborate effectively. Ensure a diverse and balanced evaluation team with relevant expertise to provide comprehensive assessment.

6. **Integrate with Written Proposals:** Instead of viewing oral presentations as a replacement for written proposals, agencies should consider how the two can complement each other. For example, oral presentations could be used to clarify and expand upon key points from the written submission. Develop and use detailed scoring rubrics that allow evaluators to objectively assess each presentation against established criteria, acknowledging that while striving for objectivity, some subjectivity may remain.

7. **Provide Feedback and Promote Fairness:** After the evaluation process, provide constructive feedback to all offerors, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. This fosters transparency and helps offerors develop their skills for future opportunities.

The Future of Human-Centric Procurement

As AI continues to evolve, its role in proposal writing and evaluation will likely expand. However, the human elements of judgment, creativity, and interpersonal dynamics will remain crucial in complex procurement decisions. Oral presentations offer a way to preserve and highlight these human elements in an increasingly automated process.

Moreover, the use of oral presentations can serve as a deterrent to over-reliance on AI-generated content. Companies that invest in developing their teams' presentation and communication skills will have a distinct advantage over those that rely primarily on AI to craft their proposals.

Conclusion

In an era where AI-generated proposals threaten to overwhelm procurement professionals with a flood of indistinguishable submissions, oral presentations emerge as a powerful tool for cutting through the noise. By providing a platform for human interaction, demonstration of expertise, and real-time problem-solving, oral presentations offer a way to assess qualities that AI cannot easily replicate or evaluate.

The research by Hawkins et al. highlights both the potential benefits and the current underutilization of this approach. As buying organizations and contractors navigate the evolving landscape of AI in procurement, embracing oral presentations can provide a competitive edge and lead to more informed, effective contracting decisions.

To fully realize the benefits of oral presentations, both buyers and sellers must invest in developing the necessary skills and processes. Agencies should work to overcome the barriers to adoption by providing clear guidelines, comprehensive training, and supportive policies. Contractors, in turn, should prepare their teams to excel in face-to-face interactions, showcasing the human expertise and adaptability that set them apart from AI-generated content.

By leveraging the power of oral presentations, the procurement and supply chain communities can ensure that the procurement process remains a human-centered endeavor, even as AI plays an increasingly prominent role in proposal development. In doing so, agencies can make more informed decisions, select better-suited contractors, and ultimately deliver greater value to the taxpayers they serve.

In the face of AI's growing capabilities, the ability to articulate, demonstrate, and adapt in real-time becomes the true differentiator. Oral presentations provide this critical platform, allowing procurement teams to look beyond the polished surface of written proposals - whether AI-generated or human-crafted - and truly gauge a contractor's capability,

understanding, and fit for the project. This human-centric approach is key to navigating the complexities of modern procurement and ensuring the selection of partners who can deliver not just on paper, but in practice.



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