



How a tiny team at a children's charity won the biggest contract of their lives

Sector

Charity

Area of training

Bid writing

Delivery

In-person training plus one-to-one coaching and consultancy

Delegates

7

The challenge

Writing a winning bid for funding worth six times anything won before – without a dedicated bid-writing team.

The solution

Team bid-writing training plus one-to-one coaching and consultancy for the lead bid writer.

The results

Beating national childcare charities to the £2.9 million result.

When the local authority announced it was changing the structure of the family support service in Hertfordshire, charity One YMCA faced writing the biggest bid in its history – or losing £500,000 in funding.

One YMCA was already providing outreach and support for children and their families through its two children's centre groups in the county. The centres are a place for parents and caregivers to bring children for activities, and to get help with the tougher aspects of raising children. They provide access to courses, advice and services covering everything from breastfeeding and language development to dealing with domestic abuse.

'It's very broad: whatever that family might need, that's what we'll offer them,' says Director of Family Support Serreta Pritchard. 'And we make sure that families are getting the support they need very early on, to prevent it becoming a bigger issue.'

Win everything or lose everything

As Head of Children's Centres at the time, Serreta was responsible for strategic oversight, ensuring the centres offered an ever-increasing quality of support. Though not technically a bid writer or manager, she'd had to act as one before – and would now need to again. But the scale of this bid went beyond any she'd worked on in the past.

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Serreta Pritchard, Director of Family Support, One YMCA



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The local authority was changing the approach to how support was divided across Hertfordshire. Rather than the existing system of 29 groups, it would instead split the county into four quadrants and put each of those quadrants out to tender. Where the team at One YMCA had previously held the contract for two groups, they were now going to have to bid for something five times the size – or end up with nothing. ‘It was win everything or lose everything,’ Serreta explains. ‘We would win a whole quadrant or we would win nothing.’

Not only that. ‘This quadrant was worth £2.9 million,’ says Serreta. ‘Previously our total of the two groups that we had, between them, was £500,000. That’s quite a jump. So we knew we needed some support.’

Finding help

They had hit a wall in identifying where they could improve. This high-achieving team had narrowly lost a £1 million bid the previous year, coming second with their highest scores to date. ‘If the competition was that high then we needed to up our game. We needed to increase our scores.’

So Serreta knew she needed to source some help. And it had to be in writing skills. ‘Scores are won based on your ability to explain how you will deliver the service, rather than on past experience,’ says Serreta. ‘And this wasn’t going to be just a case of me reading through and thinking I could change that sentence or this – there was more that needed to change.’

She knew it would have to be a bid-writing course, and it had to be one built around their very particular requirements. ‘I definitely wanted a training course where it would be specifically *our* course, rather than us putting ourselves onto something more generic,’ explains Serreta. ‘And I found with Emphasis that you would tailor something specifically to our needs. That was why I came to you.’

Hesitations and a difficult brief

Despite this, for CEO Guy Foxell, there was a moment early on when it didn’t seem like the course would be the right fit. Serreta explains, ‘He didn’t feel that the initial draft agenda was in enough depth. So I went back to [account manager] Luke and he said “No problem – we can adjust that.” And what we actually received was at exactly the right depth.’

Serreta knew pitching the course right would be challenging – it needed to be advanced yet accessible for a mixed group. While she and Guy – the chief writers for the Hertfordshire bid – had experience of writing bids, the other delegates had little to none. ‘I had a really wide range of people, but I made it really clear that the course had to be focused on me and Guy, as we’d actually write the bid,’ says Serreta. ‘Yet all of the staff came out saying that they had really learned something. It was a difficult brief, but it was very, very well achieved.’

Learning from the past

The course contained highly tailored examples and bespoke exercises that Emphasis built from the previous bids that Serreta supplied. ‘I’d sent previous bid documents and our feedback. I explained I needed to know what we needed to do differently to get a higher score in each of those areas,’ says Serreta. ‘We then had sections of them to analyse during the training session.’

In working on these exercises partway through the day, the team were able to apply the techniques they’d been learning and understand how to transform the answers themselves. ‘It was really helpful to



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Supportive one-to-one coaching

Since this bid was so pivotal, Serreta was already planning to find some one-to-one help as well. She just wasn't sure, *before* the training, whether this help would come from Emphasis. 'I didn't book the consultations till after the course. I was looking for someone who could be the right person, but until I'd met [the trainer] Gary, and until he'd done that training, I didn't know whether or not he could be that person. But he absolutely was.'

Over several sessions as the bid deadline approached, Serreta shared her draft work with Gary, who made comments and sent it back for Serreta to work on again. The pair also met up to go through the drafts in detail together.

'The coaching was incredibly supportive to me,' says Serreta.

In Gary, with his combination of expertise in bid-writing and an outsider's perspective on the ins and outs of the children's centres, Serreta had found the ideal collaborator. 'What I wanted and what I got from him was a fresh set of eyes, but also someone who knew nothing about the world in which we were writing. If he could read and understand it then we'd pitched it right. We knew there'd be commissioners who might not understand everything that happens on the ground.'

And this consultative approach helped to fine-tune not just the writing itself but the process. 'Gary was really helpful in picking up on things. There was one bit where the question was titled "Premises", but they were actually asking about the services *within* the premises. I'd completely missed it, but he helped me see it. And we got a really high score for that one in the end.'

A £2.9 million result

So after the training, consultation and coaching, the million-pound question – or rather the 2.9 million-pound question – is did they win the bid?

And yes, they did.

'We won the contract. A 2.9 million pound contract,' says Serreta. 'We came second place for a one million pound contract a year previously, so to get a 2.9 million pound contract was just amazing.'

Serreta and Guy are not bid writers or bid managers by trade – but they were, as she rightly points out, for the months it took to produce this one. In doing so, they beat some national childcare charities to the contract – a fact that makes the win even sweeter. 'Where national childcare charities have a bid-writing team, we don't,' says Serreta. 'And it's something we're even more proud of because of that.'

5 reasons to choose Emphasis

1. Over 20 years' experience

We've helped improve writing and communications skills for over 50,000 delegates and we've worked with over 5,000 companies – including many just like yours.

4. Post-course support

All delegates have access to our dedicated helpdesk for a year after their course, and we'll send them free tips and resources by email.

2. Unique pre-course analysis

Using our unique method, we analyse the writing of every attendee before training, so our trainers have a solid understanding of each person's writing issues from the start.

5. Our expert trainers

We only recruit trainers who have a strong background in professional writing and communications – and who are able to unfailingly deliver exceptional courses.

3. Full course customisation

Our specialist course developers work hard to create a programme that's customised exactly to the problems your team are facing.

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