Helpful tips for winning more corporate catering business

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The corporate catering industry is highly competitive and writing a catering services bid can be a daunting task. Whether your focus is national, regional or confined to a specific city, your bid is likely to face stiff competition from a large number of companies offering similar services. With an estimated 7,316 companies offering catering services in the UK alone, even the largest firms like Compass and Sodexo have diversified in recent years, including non-catering options to expand their portfolio.

Indeed, according to IBIS World’s Catering Services in the UK Market Research Report, owing to the level of competition, none of those operating in the sector hold a dominant market share.

However, while the scale and opportunity for year-round repeat orders presented by offering corporate catering make it very attractive for any caterer, in such a crowded marketplace, it is vital that your pitch is well-presented and catches the potential client’s attention. There are several key ingredients to make your bid stand out.

The process is not dissimilar to sending a CV to a prospective employer, and indeed, when writing your bid, you are applying for a job. Therefore, many of the same rules or guidelines apply: keep it formal but friendly and make it short, but long enough to convey all of the relevant information.

In order to make the pitch attractive to the prospective client, it is important to write an engaging and compelling cover letter/email, explaining succinctly why your catering firm ought to be selected. As well as highlighting previous experience and relevant working relationships, this should introduce your terms of business, noting whether any of the costs are negotiable. First impressions are important, and this introduction will set the tone for future correspondence.

While you may be willing to negotiate, your bid is effectively a quote, so it is important to stipulate when you expect to be paid.
Where many catering services vary is in the menu. This is the core of your proposal, and should emphasise the strengths outlined in your cover letter.

Corporate events usually require a swift service, with sandwiches, wraps and other finger foods being convenient options that are unlikely to result in mess. A client will expect a certain amount of flexibility in this preliminary menu, so it is best to present a number of options including fixed price menus, enabling the client to understand the per head cost as well. You can offer fixed price menus in ‘multiples’ (of say 5), which allows to you standardise production and packaging - benefitting both you and your client.

When serving corporate clients, caterers are entrusted to act as company representatives. Therefore, relationships with customers rely on trust. One of the keys to achieving and maintaining this is transparency. Clients are more likely to be amenable if they have been given all the information up front - it is important to be realistic and honest. The aim of the game is to win repeat business, and overselling your service is likely to be discovered if you are unable to fulfil promises made in your bid.

This is the absolute minimum any client will expect, so cannot be viewed as a differentiator. However, it will be noticed if you get it wrong. Considering the level of competition, it is no wonder that many caterers are automating their ordering and invoicing with software like Spoonfed. This has long been a thorn in the side of catering companies, with many still reliant on paper and spreadsheets. If your firm is one of these trailblazers, mention it in your bid, emphasising the ease of selection reliability of information and options for one-click repeat ordering.

Sources: Apex Insight, IBIS World

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