How to write something that survives being forwarded

What happens to an argument in a room nobody from the firm attends

Gates. Relevance: no. Credibility: secondary. Proof: secondary. **Safety: primary.** Access: no.

Every document you send gets read at least once by somebody you'll never meet, with nobody there to explain it. Write so the argument still stands when you're subtracted from it.

Questions this guide answers

- How can our proposal make sense to a decision maker who was not in the meetings?
- What context and evidence must a proposal carry for a reader who was not in the room?
- How can we test whether a document makes sense without a presenter?

The symptom

The meeting went well. Genuinely well. The champion followed the whole thing, pushed back in the two places worth pushing back on, and asked what a first phase would look like.

Then three weeks of nothing, and the answer came back no.

Ask what happened and you get some version of *we went a different direction internally*. Which is accurate, as far as it goes. The direction was a conference room the firm was never invited to, populated by people who met the recommendation as an attachment forwarded on a Thursday afternoon with about four words of introduction above it.

Nobody in that room heard the pitch. They read the leftovers of it.

Why it keeps happening

Because the firm writes for the person who gives feedback, and the people who decide never give any.

Professional-services decisions get made by more people than the firm ever meets. A direct contact can understand the recommendation completely, agree with all of it, and still have to explain it to a partner who wasn't briefed, a committee that reads sixty pages a week, a procurement function with its own scoring sheet, or a board member who will spend eleven minutes on it. The firm's material has to work in all of those rooms, and it was drafted with exactly one reader in mind, because that reader is the only one who ever responds.

We've written the deck that only worked with a presenter attached, and found out three weeks later.

What stays consistent, across three decades of watching selection meetings from the inside, is how little of the firm's argument makes it through the door. The version that gets discussed is whatever the champion could reconstruct from memory, plus whatever survived being skimmed.

There's a newer version of the same problem. The stranger often doesn't read it cold anymore, they paste it into a model and read the summary, which means a document that needs its author present now loses twice.

What the buyer is doing at the Safety gate

Carrying somebody else's argument into a room where they'll be asked to own it.

That's the champion's position, and it's uncomfortable in a way firms rarely account for. They didn't make this decision alone, they can't unmake it alone, and the question waiting for them has almost nothing to do with the quality of the work. It's *why this firm*. If the document doesn't answer that without them standing next to it, they improvise. Under pressure. In front of people whose opinion of their judgment has consequences.

Most people, faced with that, quietly stop advocating. It never looks like a decision. They stop pushing, the item slides to next month's agenda, and the firm never learns that the argument died in a hallway.

The asymmetry underneath it is old and reliable. The unfamiliar option gets asked *why this?* The familiar one gets asked *why not?* Your champion is standing on the wrong side of that question with whatever you handed them.

The correction

Give the document the property it's missing, which is portability. It has to carry its own context, make its own evidence legible, and answer the questions coming from people who have no relationship with your firm.

Snippet 30 covers the one-page defense as a deliverable. This is the property underneath it, and it belongs in everything you send, including the material with no defense job at all.

Strip the shorthand. Every term of art that entered the vocabulary during the meetings gets defined in a clause or removed. If a phrase only means something because of a conversation in March, it's noise to a reader who wasn't there, and worse than noise, because it signals that this document was written for somebody else.

Restate the situation at the top. Before anything gets proposed, a stranger needs to know what problem is being solved and who says it's a problem. Four sentences. The champion will skip them. The board member won't.

Make the evidence self-contained. A number needs its source and its comparison sitting next to it. *Response rates went to 3.4%* means nothing to a reader who doesn't know what they were before, where the figure came from, or whether that's good. Half the numbers in the average proposal only work if you attended the meeting where they were explained.

Name the objections in the document. There are two or three things a skeptical third party will raise, and you already know what they are. Put them in writing with answers attached, so the champion isn't the one improvising a response to the firm's weakest point.

Then test it the only way that works. Hand it to somebody in your own firm who wasn't on the account, and ask them to explain back what's being recommended and why. What they can't reconstruct is what the committee won't reconstruct either.

Before and after

Before. *As discussed, the phased approach addresses the attribution gap identified during discovery and aligns with the maturity model we reviewed.*

After. *Right now nobody at the firm can say which activity produced the last twenty inquiries. That's the problem this solves. Phase one measures it, which takes about six weeks and changes nothing else, so phase two spends against evidence. If the measurement shows the current mix is working, phase two gets smaller.*

What backfires

Writing a script the champion is expected to recite. Optional wording and a one-page defense can be useful support. The advocate still owns the judgment, and senior people can feel it when the firm tries to take that away. The document has to survive without them. It doesn't get to tell them what to say.

The other failure is length. A document nobody can carry has the same problem as a document nobody can defend.

Run this on your own material

Open the last proposal you sent. Delete every sentence that assumes the reader attended a meeting, including the ones that just reference a phrase from one.

Read what's left.

For most firms, what's left is the pricing, the team bios, and a scope of work, which is exactly the pile a committee reads as *this is expensive and generic*. The argument was in the room, and the room ended.

Rebuild the deleted material so it works cold. Then run the colleague test before it goes out.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when a question comes back in the language of somebody you've never spoken to. When the champion asks for a version to send rather than a meeting to schedule. When procurement's questions are about scope and terms, which means they understood the thing well enough to price it.

Hold when every new participant requires a new presentation. When the champion keeps offering to walk somebody through it, that's the document telling you it can't travel. Hold too when your own

colleague reads it and explains it back wrong, and resist the urge to correct them out loud, because the committee gets no correction at all.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · Why nobody gets fired hiring IBM, on the question that arrives when a decision goes wrong.

Research Library · Entry 14, professional-services buying and the committee. Entry 21, identity, defensibility and social risk.

Next move · Go to How to help a buyer defend the decision to go with you.