Many independent information professionals (IIPs) work outside traditional library settings, interacting with their clients mostly by telephone or e-mail and relying almost exclusively on online resources and primary research to meet their clients’ diverse information needs. Many IIPs are professionally trained librarians for whom the traditional reference interview remains at the top of the list of essential skills. In fact, the reference interview takes on even greater importance when the reference question leads to large-scale, complex research projects that may require weeks or months to complete.

For most IIPs, the reference interview and proposal comprise the first phase of any large research project. In addition to communicating important information about fees and costs, work schedules, payment policies and other business details, the proposal conveys the IIP’s understanding of the client’s information needs and establishes project parameters. The proposal also offers the IIP an opportunity to discuss expected outcomes, offer an assessment of the information environment and touch on potential challenges. Most importantly, the proposal process encourages communication between the IIP and the client to ensure that both parties agree on the scope and detail of the research project, its costs and duration and its likely success. A good proposal demonstrates the IIP’s understanding of the client’s question(s), familiarity with relevant resources and how to use them, sensitivity to budget issues and ability to provide value.

Though the content and format of any proposal are determined by the project requirements, the document should cover several key components.

**Objectives and Scope.** Summarize what you learned during the reference interview. Describe in detail the project as you understand it: what your client wants to know, and why, and how the information will be used. By the time you start drafting the proposal, you should be able to articulate clearly your client’s information needs (“Client A has requested secondary research to assess the state of the industry on Topic X…” or “Client C has requested that IIP establish and implement an ongoing competitive intelligence service to cover the following competitors, industries, products, regions…”). Include any agreed-upon search parameters (for example, limiting the project to secondary research in U.S. sources published in the past five years). If you can’t develop this section easily, get on the phone and talk to the client again.

The IIP’s ability to identify information that is – or would be – valuable to the client is at the heart of what we do. For example, exploratory research undertaken during the proposal process might identify information that would be valuable to the client if he or she were aware of it. Suppose that your client requests research to explore aspects A, B and C about a target topic. If your exploratory research identifies aspects D, E and F as critical to the overall project, then offer your big-picture perspective to encourage the client to include the additional factors in the research plan. In the proposal, you could state this as follows: “You have asked us to find information on aspects A, B and C of the target topic. Our research plan for this work is described below. During our exploratory research, we found extensive discussion of aspects D, E and F, often in conjunction with topics ABC; these seem to be important to your inquiry because…A research plan that
includes these topics is also presented below.” Then, price out the project with the additional topics, unbundled from the initial request. If you come across this additional information during the course of the research, you can contact the client to say “I’m also finding D, E and F, and these seem important because…Would you like me to incorporate these in the project?” Then, of course, you’ll need to renegotiate the work as an add-on the original proposal with appropriate pricing and scheduling.

**Information Environment.** Describe the information you expect to find and how well you expect that your findings will, or will not, address your client’s needs. Here’s where you can offer caveats, too, as to time and costs, especially if resources are obscure or very expensive or if you expect that results might be either very copious (thus requiring more time to sift and analyze results) or very thin (thus requiring more time to seek out substantial information). This description assumes that you have done some exploratory research to identify likely sources and methods or that you know what to do and where to look.

**Search Strategy and Methodology.** Don’t give away the store, but offer some general guidance on how you will approach the project, what overall strategies and types of resources you will employ, the agreed-upon start date and how long you expect the project will take. This information will help your client feel confident that you have a thought-out plan and that you will not jump in at random. If your client has agreed to provide specific information or assistance (such as providing internal data in a specific format or arranging interviews with key personnel), be sure that these points are made clear. There is no need to divulge specific search strategies or identify specific databases or reference tools unless your client has requested that you do so.

**Reports and Other Deliverables.** Briefly describe what reports and deliverables you will prepare for the client, specifying formats and delivery methods, as should have been discussed in your reference interview. Your deliverables might include full text documents from database providers, compilations or aggregations of data and information (fully cited and in full compliance with copyright law, of course), analysis, narrative reports, bibliographies and indices, draft documents for the client’s further use, slide presentation, spreadsheets and so forth.

**Fees, Terms and Conditions.** In clear terms, state such things as your fees, estimated expenses, known taxes, project schedules, terms of payment, disclaimers, copyright considerations and nondisclosure notices. Make it clear that the client is paying for your time and expertise, not the quantity of information you retrieve; also make clear that you cannot guarantee such things as the quality or accuracy of information from third-party sources. Add a caveat that, if at any time before or during the project, the client requests changes in the scope of work, the budget or delivery dates, you reserve the right to issue a revised proposal outlining new parameters, a revised fee schedule and a revised delivery schedule.

A good research proposal summarizes the reference interview, delineates the research question or problem and outlines a professional approach to finding, analyzing and delivering information to answer the client’s question. You will know that you have written a good proposal when your client comes back with few questions, and when the project proceeds as expected.