

Making it Count: The Effective Executive Summary

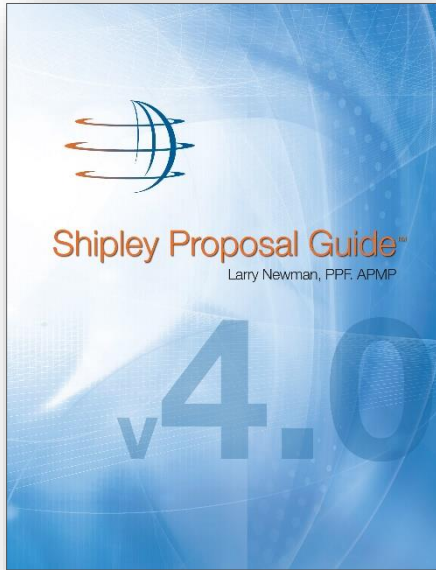
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The Effective Executive Summary

An effective Executive Summary is one of the most important parts of your proposal. It sets a positive, confident tone for the evaluators, and helps them sell you as the winner

This is an introduction into the best practices for creating effective proposal Executive Summaries

The experts agree...

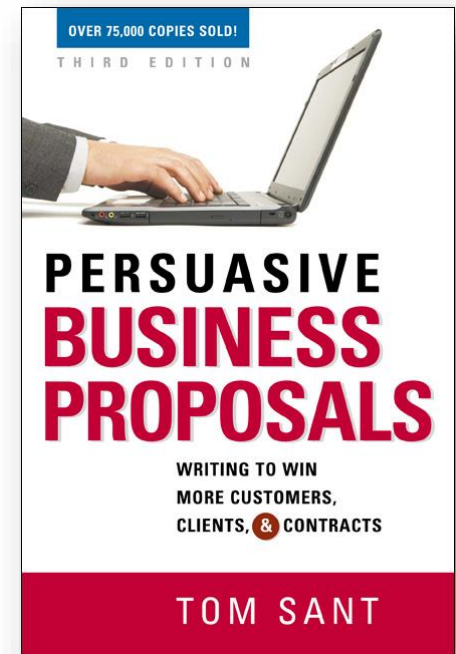


“Executive summaries are the most important pages in a proposal.”

Shipley Associates Proposal Guide, 4th edition

“The executive summary is the single most important part of your proposal.”

Dr. Tom Sant, Persuasive Business Proposals, 3rd edition



Why is it so important?

“The reason is simple: all those decision makers read the Executive Summary, they read it first, and sometimes it is all that they read.”

Because of this, the Executive Summary provides a terrific opportunity. If effective, it fosters a ‘pre-sold’ mindset in all the evaluators who read it first.

To use a simple television metaphor, it is like getting 10 minutes of free television advertising. If we advertise well, they reach for their wallets. If we advertise poorly, they turn us off.”

R. Dennis Green, APMP Perspective, Vol. III, No. 4, Jan-Feb 1993



Perspective

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Ten No-Nonsense Rules For Preparing An Effective Executive Summary

By R. Dennis Green

Why make such a big deal over an Executive Summary? It is the smallest section and the least in depth. Still, we give it inordinate attention—and with very good reason. Nothing is more perfectly tailored to reaching your customer's highest-level decision makers. No other document (when properly written) can better convey the succinct and persuasive messages that say to the customer: "why us." The reason is simple: all those decision makers read the executive summary, they read it first, and sometimes it is all that they read.

Because of this, the executive summary provides a terrific opportunity. If effective, it fosters a 'pre-sold' mindset in all the evaluators who read it first. To use a simple television metaphor, it is like getting 10 minutes of free television advertising. If we advertise well, they reach for their wallets. If we advertise poorly, they turn us off.

Though no single technique or preparation formula can be followed to architect the perfect executive summary in all instances, there are some rules of engagement that we have found to work consistently well.

Rule #1—Focus on distilling the non-trivial message
This is akin to management by objectives: you figure out what you want to say, and then you build a case to support it. Where should such messages come from? At a minimum, they address the requirements and objectives defined in the RFP by the customer. (Highlight these features and benefits—your differentiators—that set your company apart in a positive way.)

Rule #2—Start at the top.
Solicit the views (and endorsement) of your company's own top management. Start by interviewing the highest-level executives with specific knowledge and interest in your bid. If that is the President, start with the President. New business is his or her #1 job. This person will think at the same level as the audience you are trying to influence. As often as not, they will know the audience as a business and social acquaintance or

continued on page 7

Defense Acquisition Laws Reviewed

By W. L. Vincent
Executive Director

The 1991 National Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 101-510, Section 801) directed OSD to perform a review of all defense acquisition laws with a view to streamlining the acquisition process. This law required establishment of a panel composed of recognized experts in acquisition laws and government policy with representation from the government and private sector. The task was to be completed by January 15, 1993.

The panel was nominated in April of 1991. The process of obtaining approval, agreement to serve, and satisfying provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) took several months and the first meeting was finally held on September 3, 1991. The panel quickly established the plan for completion which included establishment of objectives, identification of pertinent statutes, assignment of status recommendations, and formulation of final report. The panel is approaching the end of four deliberations and with some luck will meet the congressional deadline. This article will discuss the procedures used by the panel and a subsequent article will address specific recommendations.

The panel consists of 13 members with a balanced representation of acquisition experts, legal experts, government, private, and industry. These were further divided into six working groups with each group given

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Why write an Executive Summary?

An Executive Summary:

- Shows our customer we understand their issues and/or problems they want solved
- Shows we understand what is required to achieve their goals
- Explains how we (will) achieve those goals
- Proves we are the best qualified, lowest risk contractor
- Neutralizes any weaknesses in our solution
- Subtly ghosts weaknesses in our competitors' solutions
- Summarizes our offer
- Simplifies complexity and shifts the 'burden of reasoning'
- Is written with the decision maker(s) and their advisors in mind

However, remember that it...

- (Most likely) will not be evaluated, or score points

Other uses for Executive Summary

- Internally, outside of your Proposal Team
- An Executive Summary communicates to senior executives your
 - **Win Strategy**
 - **Win themes**
 - **Discriminators, and**
 - **Baseline solution**
- May be required at a Gate Review
 - But would be beneficial anyway

Who writes it?

- **Business Development / Sales**
 - Owns the Executive Summary
 - Writes first draft prior to proposal kick-off
- **Subject Matter Experts**
 - Provide input
- **Proposal Team support**
 - Proposal Manager provides outline and structure
 - Proposal authors help to write and/or edit
 - Proposal graphics team provide artwork
- **Senior Executives**
 - Review
 - Provide endorsement



Reality: don't be surprised if you have to write it yourself!

When do you write it?

- After you have a Win Strategy, and before proposal writing begins
- The Executive Summary is continuously updated throughout proposal development
- It **must** be reviewed at Red Team and Gold Team alongside the proposal

The majority of Capture Managers will agree with this timing: but how many will actually follow it?

Reality: don't be surprised if you're writing it last! Often, key content (text, graphics) is not available until the end



Who is the customer audience?

In a typical Government procurement, there are several key entities forming the Source Selection Team (SST):

- The Source Selection Authority (SSA) makes the final decision based on best-value
- The Source Selection Advisory Council (SSAC) provides functional area expertise to the SSA
- The Source Selection Evaluation Board (SSEB) scores the proposal against the evaluation criteria
- The Procuring Contracting Officer (PCO), the primary business advisor and principal guidance source for the entire source selection



Identify the SSA and SSAC, or the equivalent in your procurement opportunity, and write the Executive Summary for these upper-level, non-technical decision makers

How do you write it?

- Your Executive Summary should articulate your offer in terms of your Win Strategy
- Derive three or four key themes from your Win Strategy
- Highlight differentiators (SWOT)
- Neutralize weakness (SWOT)
- Keep it customer focused! (It's really NOT about you!)
 - Use customer's name before your name, and more often
 - Restate customer vision, issues, hot buttons

Use clear, persuasive writing and graphics



Win Strategy refresher

Consider the **5 Keys** of Win Strategy:



1. **The Institution:** the formal legal and business arrangements and relationships with team members and the customer



2. **The Organization:** how human resources are organized and managed to best resonate with the customer



3. **The Program Plan:** the program management strategy



4. **System Engineering:** the systematic analysis and technical approach to best meet customer requirements



5. **The Deal:** the total financial considerations/benefits of relationship with the customer over the entire program lifecycle

For more information on developing your Win Strategy, see my 2006 presentation on the APMP California website: "[Win Strategy 101](#)"

SWOT refresher

	Helpful	Harmful
Internal	Strengths	Weaknesses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What advantages do you have over your competitors? • What do you do better than your competitors? • How does your offer uniquely benefit the customer? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your known weaknesses? • What will your competitors likely see as your weaknesses? • What may cause you to lose?
External	Opportunities	Threats
	<p>Are there PEST changes in your favor?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your competitors doing that you should worry about? • Are there PEST changes that are not in your favor?

Win Themes

What is a Win Theme?

A Win Theme

- Is a recurring, primary message to evaluators
- Describes what we **do/are going to do** to meet each major requirement
- Proves we've done it before
- Is compelling to show we are compliant, different from the competition, have a low/managed risk, and are best value
- Answers the "So what?"
- Shows the benefits to the customer of our proven features

Win Themes (continued)

How do you use a Win Theme?

Win Themes are

- Woven into text indirectly with proof
 - allow the evaluator to realize the Win Theme for themselves
- Woven into benefits when discussing the Features and Benefits of your solution
 - Remember, if there's no customer benefit to a feature, then it's not a valid feature...

Win Themes are *not*

- Continually repeated verbatim

Differentiators

- Ideally, differentiators are unique to our offer
 - Only we can say this
- Often, it's a 'me too'
 - We still have to make sure the evaluator knows we do it
 - Can we add 'with a twist'?
- Will an evaluator believe it is unique?
- Will an evaluator see it as high value?
- Will an evaluator see it as high risk?

Make sure you substantiate any claims you make, preferably quantitatively

Executive Summary size

Always follow RFP instructions (Section L), if given

Otherwise...

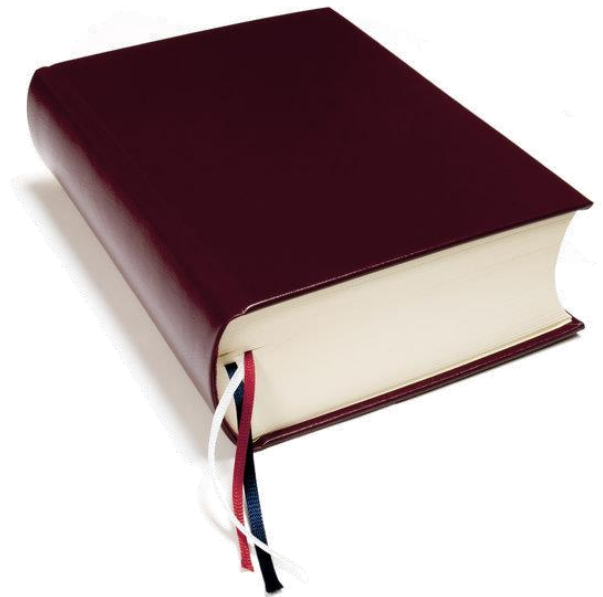
Summary [**suhm-uh-ree**] noun

a **BRIEF** account giving the main points of something

Collins English Dictionary (www.collinsdictionary.com)

Executive Summary size (continued)

- Appropriate
 - Appropriate to the overall size of the proposal
 - Appropriate to the customer or opportunity
- Small proposals
 - In front of proposal in same binder
 - May be considered to be included in page count
 - Alternatively, insert in the binder pocket
 - Two to five pages, including key graphics
- Large proposals
 - Standalone document
 - Four to 20 pages, depending on format
 - Not so long that the reader cannot invest their time to reading it!



Executive Summary design

Three things to consider:

- Template and layout
- Graphics
- Packaging

Template and layout

- For a simple approach
 - Use the proposal template
 - i.e. the same page layout, headers, footers, etc.
- Good for smaller proposals with page limitations
- Can be done in Microsoft Word
- If the Executive Summary is not page limited, consider more white space

Template and layout (continued)

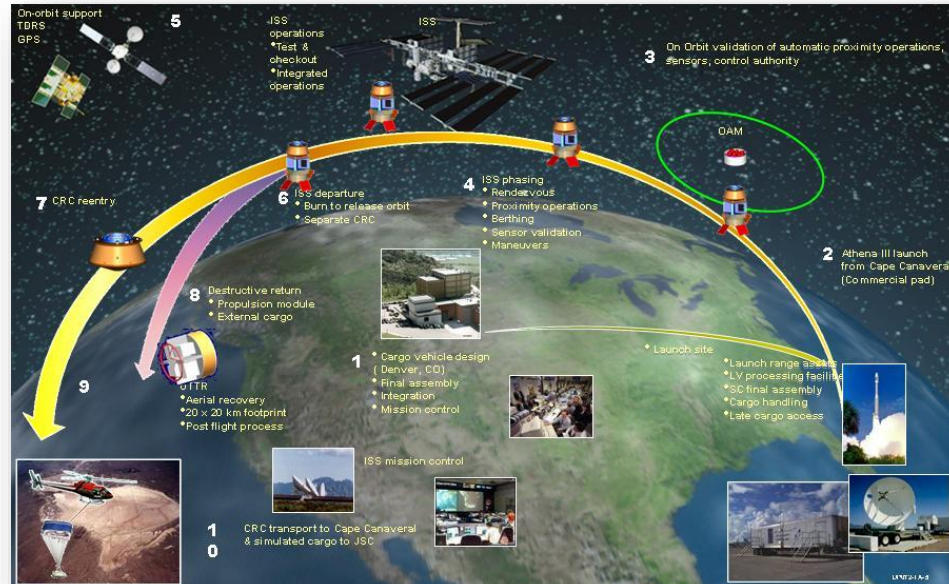
For 'bigger' proposals

- Use a brochure format
- Drafted in Microsoft Word, and then laid out in Adobe InDesign
- Full bleed, full color, glossy stock, double-sided



Graphics

- Use more graphics in the Executive Summary than in the proposal itself: go beyond 50/50
- Develop graphics and action captions before text
- Look for the 'big' graphic that shows the CONOPS (Concept of Operations)
 - Use this as early as possible in your Executive Summary



Graphics (continued)

Graphics should stand by themselves:

- If you have to explain the graphic in the text or Action Caption, redo the graphic
- The Action Caption should describe the benefits of your approach/solution shown in the graphic
- Always refer to (aka 'call out') the graphic from the text, e.g. "Figure 1-1 shows..."
- Use the text to substantiate data in the graphic if needed

Graphics (continued)

Use focus boxes, callout boxes, and pull-quote boxes to emphasize key points

- These do not need to be called out from text, but their content should be covered in the text
- These do not need figure numbers or actions captions
- Unsubstantiated claims must be substantiated in the text

If you can't get a callout box or pull-quote message in a tweet, then rewrite!

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“ You can separate your pull-quotes with quote marks, you can use horizontal or vertical rules or you can put them in a box with background color but whatever you do make a contrast from the rest of the text so that the pull-quotes are instantly recognizable as such.

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Packaging

Small Executive Summary

- Incorporated into the main proposal
- Two to four pages
- If you have more than one volume, insert into the front of all binders
- Note: it may be considered as part of page count if volume is page-limited
 - Consider inserting it into the pocket in the front of the volume binders

Always follow RFP instructions (Section L)!

Packaging (continued)

Larger, standalone Executive Summary

- D-ring binder
 - Good for larger documents ($\frac{3}{4}$ " binder and up)
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ " binders can be problematic for spines
- Spiral, coil, comb bound, etc.
 - Comb bound can allow you to change pages after binding
 - Consider newer techniques such as GBC's ProClick
- Saddle-stitched
 - Professional, brochure style; good for 8 to 16 pages
 - Can be inserted into sleeve inside main proposal binders



Executive Summary outline

Make it easy for the evaluators to select you

1. Cover letter
2. Issues and Solutions
3. Why us?

Cover letter

- Use appropriate format, i.e. letter headed paper
- Address to Contracting Officer (or equivalent)
- State the customer's key vision, goal or need
- State your Win Themes
- State your key discriminator that satisfies a customer need
- Use the appropriate signatory
- NO clichés!
 - “...is pleased to...”

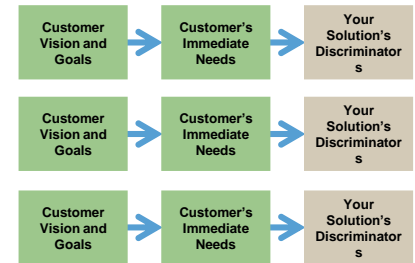


Executive Summary detailed outline

Optimum for customer focus:

- Introduction
 - 1 page
- Requirements and solutions:
 - Requirements, issues, customer objectives and hot buttons
 - Solution overview: Win Themes, Features and Benefits)
- Schedule & risk mitigation
 - 1 to 2 pages
- Past performance/prior experience
 - 1 to 2 pages
- Corporate commitment, 'Why us'?
 - 1 page
- DO NOT INCLUDE PRICE!

Introduction



Schedule and risk mitigation

Past perf/prior experience

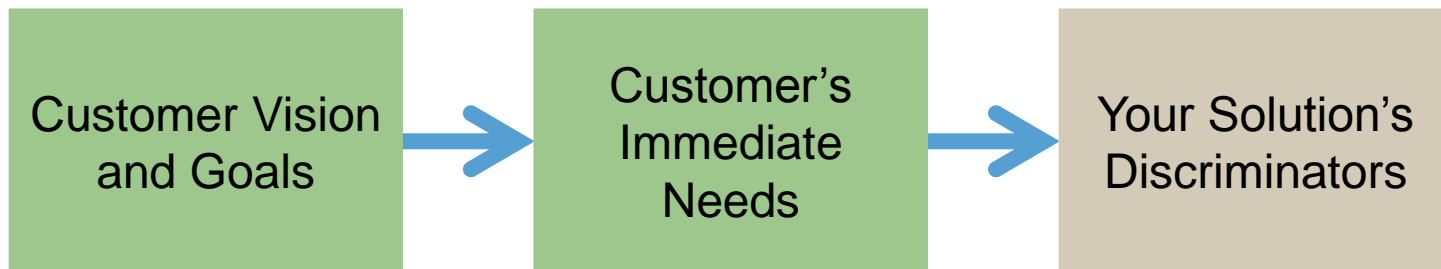
Commitment:
Why us?

Issues and solutions

Organize scenarios around the Evaluation Criteria, not Proposal Outline

For each scenario

- State the requirements, issues, customer objectives and/or hot buttons (1 page)
- Provide an overview of your solution (1 – 2 pages)
 - Win Themes
 - Features & Benefits
 - Aligns with customer's requirements



Corporate commitment

- Tells the customer, “Why us”
- Corporate commitment is the insurance policy that mitigates program risk
- How committed are you?
 - Did you make a pre-award investment?
 - Have you funded and built prototypes that prove performance?
 - Did you build a new facility?
 - Did you hire staff in advance?
 - Have you appointed a Program Manager who reports to your Executive Management?

Cleaning it Up

Apply the 'Cs':

- **Compliant:** does it meet all customer requirements?
- **Compelling:** will it make the customer want to buy it?
 - Is it boastful or does it contain exaggeration?
- **Credible:** will the customer understand that you could perform the effort with low risk?
- **Correct:** is it accurate?
- **Consistent:** across all volumes and sections?
- **Concise:** is it brief and to the point?
 - “Omit needless words” –The Elements of Style, William Strunk, 1918
- **Clear:** will they ‘get it’? Cut the jargon, tech and geek speak, and clichés.

Does each feature have a Customer Benefit?

Questions?

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