



# Writing an Effective Executive Summary

The things you need to know

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## What is an executive summary?

**An executive summary is, in essence, a sales pitch.** It is a succinct summary of why the customer should choose you and your services. You can more or less ignore the word *'executive'* as this really has little meaning (it is a throwback to a time when a busy *'executive'* would be just given the summary to read) and focus in on the word *'summary'*.

Today, the executive summary may be read by anyone with a stakeholding in the winning bid selection process. This includes procurement evaluators, end users of the service, consultants advising the customer and, yes, even executives at the top of the corporate food chain. The challenge is to write in such a way so that every potential reader will be fully engaged, intrigued and ready to explore more of your bid.

The people who will read your executive summary will be expecting it to summarise the main, compelling elements of your bid, how it meets with their specific objectives and why they should select you as their supplier of choice above all others.

## How long should the executive summary be?

There are various rules which are bandied about such as *'never longer than three pages'* or *'one page of executive summary to every thirty-five pages of bid'* but, whatever you have heard, the important thing is that the document does what it is supposed to do. Our advice is to make it as long as it needs to be to convey the message while adhering to some fundamental guidelines (which we will give you shortly).

For your guidance, *our* general rule is that your executive summary should be about three pages per hundred pages of bid. You are unlikely to be able to condense a hundred pages to less than that. This means that a five or six page executive summary for a two hundred page bid would not be exceptional.

## When do I write the executive summary?

Here is another point of debate amongst bid writers. The majority will say at the end, some will say at the beginning and, as you might suspect, here at Bid Perfect, we have a different point of view. We believe that there should be no fixed time for writing it but that we are always writing our executive summary throughout the life of the bid preparation phase. In fact, we may even be formulating it before the ITT (Invitation to Tender) actually arrives.

When we know about a bid in advance and we are doing our research, our planning, our exploration of the customer – we are also thinking about what the executive summary will look like. It will already be taking shape in our mind as we start to accumulate information on the customer's objectives and we are factoring in what our relationship with them is telling us.

When we finally start to write our response, we should draft the executive summary, continue to refine it throughout the bid writing phase and then create the final version at the end.

### How should I use graphics in the executive summary?

Carefully selected graphics which illustrate a specific business point or replace text may be considered. The most important thing is to completely avoid generic brochure pictures which make no point and can actually end up being irritating.

If you can include graphics which are specifically related to the customer (e.g. featuring their logo, their products/services, their buildings, etc.) then these are good to use.

The general rules for the use of any type of graphics in a bid are they should be:

- Focused on advancing the business case
- Non-generic (typical posed model pictures or library shots)
- Of high quality and high resolution
- Captioned to explain how they relate to the text they are supporting

#### Example:



This is a good graphic because it is high quality, shows something happening and has an explanatory caption.

This is a poor graphic because it is generic, posed and carries no explanatory caption.



Close attention to health & safety for Jones and Jones plc will result in reduced risk and improved employee relations.

For a more detailed understanding of how to use graphics in bids, please refer to:

**Bid Perfect - Using Bid Graphics Effectively**

## So then, what are the executive summary ‘rules’ I should follow?

*Rules are made to be broken.* How many times have you heard that phrase? There are times that we agree with this principle and times when we don’t. There is nothing wrong with going *off piste* occasionally, to coin a phrase, but when creating the executive summary, you should really try to stay on track and follow this simple list:

1. Write clearly and concisely about them and their objectives, keeping self-references to an absolute minimum. Remember that this is all about them.
2. Don’t include anything in the summary which is not explained fully elsewhere in the bid.
3. Keep to a clearly constructed and rational structure (which we have given you below).
4. Don’t discuss pricing (except in the broadest terms) or technical details (again, except in the broadest terms). If you believe you have a great financial offer or beneficial technical innovation, then include the headlines.
5. Always look for the words that will capture their interest and sustain it. The main task of the executive summary, apart from summarising your bid, is to make them want to read more.
6. Consider opportunities to reduce the text without losing impact or meaning. This may mean developing a paragraph into a series of short, sharp bullet points or perhaps a well-chosen graphic. Adhere at all times to the principles of lean writing, avoiding tautological phrasing and non-sequiturs.
7. Remember you are not writing marketing copy or a page for a brochure, which means avoid generic references wherever they crop up and continue to focus on the customer.
8. Mention them more than you mention your own organisation.
9. Be empathetic to them. Share their pain, their goals and suggest that a successful outcome will be mutually rewarding.

## The structure of the executive summary

The following key elements of a great executive summary are flexible and can be given greater or lesser emphasis as the subject demands. You can make more of one area if it is a key win theme for you and lessen the focus on areas which are not of huge importance. You should use your own good sense and understanding of the customer to work out where to place your emphasis.

### 1. Focus on them – don’t start by writing about you

The opening paragraph/s should be entirely focused on them and will summarise what you know about them. The job of the opening text is to connect them emotionally to the content, to the bid as a whole and to you. This is best achieved when they are immediately reading about themselves.

A typical opening paragraph may look like this:

*Jones and Jones plc is the premier supplier of stainless steel widgets and has grown substantially in the previous decade. Two good examples of this growth are the recent opening of manufacturing plants in India and Malaysia and the creation of significant new employment opportunities in the UK. Interestingly, your Chairman's annual statement places the "immediate future focus on developing Jones and Jones' environmental and sustainability credentials"; this connects well with the main emphasis of our bid to you.*

### 2. Describe their primary objectives

We will then move smoothly into a summary of the key objectives we have identified. We are trying to keep the executive summary as succinct as possible, so this is an ideal opportunity to write leanly and with focus. Bullet points often work well.

For example:

*We recognise that your main objectives in selecting a supplier of widgets are to:*

- *Neutralise the risk inherent in buying widgets and to ensure that premium quality of product is achieved at all times*
- *Award the contract to a supplier who can demonstrate a programme which will reduce net costs over the period of the contract*
- *Consolidate your supply lines to reduce time spent managing multiple suppliers, create greater efficiency and reap the inevitable cost savings*
- *Create a partnership with a supplier who will empathise with your drive to reduce environmental impact and increase levels of supply chain sustainability*
- *Ensure the transfer of the service to a new global supplier is seamless and cost neutral*

### 3. Identify the key elements of your solution/service to them and express the quantified outcomes

This is where we are going to give them the headlines of our proposal; the point at which we will start to introduce ourselves and begin to talk about us in a way that completely connects with the reader. The most important thing to remember here is that we are on familiar territory when we discuss our own company but the focus must only be on what we will do for them and how we will further their objectives. They will have little or no interest in us outside of what we will do for them.

We are going, again, to be succinct and focused completely on them and the objectives we outlined earlier.

More importantly, we are going to use clear quantification as our hook. We want them to see a stake in the ground, so to speak. We want them to know exactly what our performance benchmark is.

For example:

*We have taken care to address the requirements of your ITT and this bid meets (and in most cases, exceeds) all your objectives. The main elements of our proposal cover:*

- *The elimination of risk for Jones and Jones plc. Many widget manufacturers supply sub-standard products whereas we will guarantee the quality you expect. The processes we will use will reduce your risk to 0%.*
- *Year on year, real term cost savings, are critical to you. Being able to accurately predict cost and budget accordingly is essential for you and our commercial offer will demonstrate a real cost reduction of 5% for each year of the contract.*
- *We estimate that by selecting us, and by taking advantage of the single supply line, we will reduce the time spent managing widget suppliers by 50%. You are currently spending 40 hours a month doing this at an approximate cost of £50 per hour. This will represent a saving of £12,000 each year. Or £36,000 for the life of the contract.*
- *We want to work in partnership with you and help you to achieve your carbon reduction targets. The use of our global hybrid delivery fleet will contribute a reduction of 4.8 carbon tonnes.*
- *Should you choose us, we will transfer the entire service to us at zero cost.*

**Remember that people do not buy what it is – they buy what it does.**

#### 4. Discuss your key win themes

Win themes are often talked about in the process of bid writing but, in our experience, they are rarely employed to full effect.

There is nothing new, or revelatory here. Win themes do exactly what the term suggests; they are the main themes of your bid which you think will encourage the buyer to select you. They should be reasonably easy to identify when you are planning your bid response and, when you start writing, you will be looking for every opportunity to weave them into your written document.

Win themes should be ubiquitous. They inhabit your writing and will be discussed wherever it is appropriate to bring them in.

Win themes may be:

- The main subject matter of an answer
- The purpose behind a particular graphic
- Confirmed in a short statement or testimonial from a current customer
- A header for a section of the bid document
- Appear in call-out boxes

The main thing to remember about win themes is that if you have identified a compelling reason for them to choose you, you should take every opportunity to mention it wherever

you can. Your sales pitch is going to be founded upon win themes so you need to deploy them to maximum effect.

### 5. Examine the compelling elements of your commercial proposition

Here you will be outlining the rationale of your pricing which you anticipate will be appealing to the customer. This may also be a win theme for you, so apart from writing a brief summary of the pricing highlights, you might also want to weave them into other areas.

Typically, this section may look like this:

We have:

- *Priced the production, storage, delivery and fitting services according to the structure you have supplied*
- *Clearly identified the savings you will be making in each area on an additional page in the same section*
- *Noticed some areas in which you will make additional cost efficiencies and have also identified those for you*
- *Identified some pricing processes which have proved to be effective with some of our other customers and included these alternative scenarios for you to consider. Primarily, this includes consolidated monthly invoicing and the application of a fixed management fee*

Remember that you are not required in the executive summary to lay out your whole pricing story. You are simply drawing their attention to the things you want them to note about the commercial argument you are putting forward.

### 6. Refer to primary evidence you are supplying

Evidence to support your claims is essential. People buy what they believe in. The more evidence you can supply which backs you up, the more likely they are to believe what you say.

In the executive summary, you will simply refer to the various levels of evidence you have supplied. You will not be required to re-state it all. However, if you have a short client testimonial, for example, that is highly complementary to the content of your bid, this can be brought to the fore in the executive summary.

Your paragraph relating to evidence may look something like this:

*We have proposed clear outcomes for Jones and Jones plc in this bid, many of which will not be offered by other competing companies. However, none of this will make much of an impact if we cannot support it with clear and unimpeachable evidence. We have taken care to provide you with the information you will need to check on our claims and to reassure you that we are offering you the sustainable benefits you will be expecting.*

*The principle evidence we have supplied is:*

- *Named and recent case studies, with an identified referee whom you can contact for confirmation*
- *Several reports from independent third parties which add credibility to our claims*
- *A free proof of concept trial period which is risk free for you but will give you the opportunity to assess us according to your own metrics*
- *Performance guarantees backed by financial bonds which reduce your risk exposure to zero*

### **7. Tell them you want their business – be firm that you want to win**

Quite easy this one. Tell them you want to do business with them and make it clear that you see this as being important for you. This mind-set is critical to a winning bid. Some companies can come across as arrogant (even if they don't mean to be) in their bids. We have read bids which almost have a 'if you don't choose us you must be mad' feel to them. Your job is to reverse that mentality and let them know that you are not blasé about them – it means a lot to you to win; your statement may look something like this:

*It will be a significant achievement for us to win this bid and to become your supplier of choice. We want to do business with you because it will be mutually rewarding and other potential customers will take note of your confidence in us. Jones and Jones plc is a recognised and valued brand and we will be proud to be associated with you.*

### **8. Tell them how easy the transition will be**

What will happen if you are awarded the contract? One of the main non-buying motives is fear of change; the disruption that may occur, the loss of existing relationships and the potential for un-budgeted cost of change.

A simple paragraph should respond to these fears and reassure them that you have this covered – that you are competent, experienced and will evidence successful and seamless account transitions.

A typical paragraph may look like this:

*If we are to win this bid, you will want to be assured that we have a secure and risk-free process for the transition of the service to us. In this bid we have provided a highly detailed, step by step, Implementation Plan. However, you will require evidence of previous successful implementations (with companies of similar size and scope to Jones and Jones plc) and we have therefore provided a reference for you to follow up. You can be assured that the transition will be cost-free and will be seamless.*



### When you are finished – take a deep breath and...

...do one final thing. Get it reviewed. You must ask a *competent* person to check it for the following:

- Is it convincing?
- Does it have a logical flow?
- Is it well written?
- Does it focus on the customer?
- Does it succinctly capture the bid?
- Is it relevant to the ITT (Invitation to Tender)?
- Does it promise true value and real benefits?
- Are the win themes clearly stated?
- Does it summarise the Why Choose You questions?

You will also need it proofread to make sure it has zero typos. Once it has been signed off you are ready to go and...

### ...that's pretty much it!

The executive summary for your bid is the first thing the evaluators will read and if you don't get it right at this stage they will have a reduced opinion of you even before embarking on the main document. A poorly conceived and written executive summary will undermine the rest of your bid. Therefore, it is critical that you take note of the structure and advice we have given you here.

Remember to mention them often (certainly more times than you mention yourselves), always be seeking the opportunity to tell them about themselves, their needs and objectives. Live in their world, use their language and phraseology and never start thinking the bid is about you. It isn't. It is about them. You should be empathising with them at all times.

The primary task of the executive summary is to succinctly summarise why they should choose you.