How to write compelling executive summaries

Article on proposals best practice

by

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Are your executive summaries taut, persuasive and compelling calls to action? Or wordy rambles through your company history and new website?

What's an executive summary for?

To answer the question, 'Why you?', ideally in the three minutes a busy chief exec will give you to persuade them to appoint you. It should outline to the buyer your whole response, summarising the salient points of the proposal. If in doubt, stick religiously to the single thing that sells: BENEFITS. What does the buyer get when they hire you? Selling is not about telling them what you do, but about what *they get*.

What's an exec summary *not* for?

Anything else. The exec summary is NOT there to:

- introduce your bid: do that in the covering letter
- tell the client how delighted you are to be bidding: they're not interested in your state of mind or how you feel about the bid
- replace the covering letter, so don't top and tail
- describe in detail how you'll do the job: the client might just pass that useful 'blueprint' to their mate to do it cheaper
- talk about yourself or your organisation: clients are interested in only two things — themselves and what you can do for them

What should an executive summary include?

Reflecting the body of the bid document, your exec summary should feature six elements:

1. Statement of the client's goals, objectives, needs, desired outcomes (the client should be mentally ticking everything you say here).

2. Your proposed solution in outline, showing how it will help achieve those outcomes (the link between solution and outcome must be explicit).

3. The major benefits to the client of your solution, usually expressed in terms of more speed/quality/value/profit/kudos and/or less cost/time/loss of value/reputational damage. Most clients want service providers to make them look good.

4. Why you are the best person/team/organisation to do the job. You have the best people with the right approach/tools and the most relevant/current experience. You are 'a safe pair of hands'. This is about the three Cs: conviction, credentials and credibility.

5. Price. Debatable, I know, but if you want to win bids you need to price keenly. So price is part of your 'value proposition' and mustn't be tucked away at the back of the document like a mad aunt. Present it with confidence by linking it to the benefits that the client will get when they hire you.

6. Next steps. Show the client that you've thought about the first critical weeks of the engagement and you're ready to go.

How should we write an exec summary?

By far the most important part of your proposal and read by every member of the buying group, it must be short, punchy and easy to read. Imagine a busy chief executive in a lift with a couple of minutes between floors to 'get' your proposal. Make it easy for them.

Write from the client's perspective. What matters to them? What do they value? What DON'T they value? If you must talk about a feature of your product/service, always relate it back to how the client benefits. ''What that means for you is...' will get their attention.

Though not usually a fan of bullet points, I think an exec summary is made for them, provided they are less than a line each. Please don't go bulleting whole paragraphs of text. I'd draft element 1 (statement of the client's goals and needs) in taut prose, then use a volley of bullets to express benefits. The recipe here is, 'Blend prose and bullets judiciously'.

Also consider varying the format and page grid in the executive summary from the body of the document. If you use a single column for the proposal text, use double columns in the exec summary, or a different typeface. Your goal should be to create an executive summary that stands on its own, so the MD or FD could tear it out of the proposal and read it on the train home...and it would still make sense.

Give numerical evidence. 'A 12% growth in profits' is more compelling than 'A significant growth in profits' because it is more precise. The strategic decision-maker will be seeking hard evidence to justify their decision to select you.

And use graphics. A bar chart, image, graph or photo that supports a key point can be persuasive. Most bids are starved of graphics.

When should we write the executive summary?

Some people like to write it last, so they know what's in the proposal to summarise. But if you run out of time and rush it, it'll read like an afterthought. You might prefer to write it *first*, to force yourself to think through why the client should select you, then use the rest of the proposal to support it. In practice, however, it's hard to complete the executive summary before you've written the rest of the proposal.

My recommendation is to build your exec summary as you go. As you assemble the body of the proposal, note the strongest arguments for selecting you. When the time comes to write the summary, they'll be clearer in your head and faster to draft.

How long should it be?

Personal view here, but no longer than two pages. Any more than that and it becomes just another section in the document. Remember: you're summarising, not expanding on or building an argument.

Invitation2tender.com bottom-line: Even in good times, winning bids and tenders is ferociously competitive, with decisions often made on marginal differences between bidders. In the current climate, winning is even tougher. Fronting your bid with a strong executive summary is a great way of widening the gap between you and the competition. I've known chief execs to vote for a bid solely on the basis of a cracking executive summary.

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