**Guide**

**to**

**Executive Summaries**

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About the Author

Tom Potendyk is a senior professional with broad knowledge across program management and proposal management domains to develop high quality, responsive and competitive proposals. He excels at leading cross-functional teams in a high-pressure and fast-paced environment. Tom has produced winning proposals for large and small businesses, many as a single-person effort. He has expertise in both small, quick turn-around; and large scale, multi-year acquisitions.



Tom Potendyk is a published author of a revolutionary sales training approach for business professionals, “The Art of Business Golf”. He has been a featured author in trade magazines and a CNN article. He has a demonstrated track record of producing superior results through excellent management and organizational skills. He is able to parlay a 20 year Marine Corps career with an additional 15 years of program management and proposal development expertise into his writing.

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IN A NUTSHELL*

*Imagine you are driving to an important customer meeting. Without warning the car in front of you stops. You slam on your brakes, causing the coffee in your hand to spill and soak your shirt. It’s 1:40 PM; your meeting is at 2:00 PM so you continue to the customer’s office wondering how to clean your dirty shirt. You pull up to their building and notice a clothing store on the first floor. Relieved, you quickly park your car and run in to find a replacement shirt.*

*“Help! I spilled coffee all over my shirt, and I have an important meeting in five minutes. Do you have anything in my size?”*

*What is the best response you could hear from the salesperson?*

***“Yes, we have the perfect shirt in your size and ready to wear—and it’s on sale!”***

*It is exactly what you need. You buy it on the spot and rush to your sure-to-be successful meeting.*

*When your company receives an RFP, the customer is asking, “Help! I have a problem. Can you solve my problem within these parameters?” Your best response is, “Yes, we can solve your problem within these parameters, and this is how we will do it.”*

# INTRODUCTION

*My company* has a long history of providing excellent training solutions to the U.S. Army and other defense agencies. In terms of experience, my company is the world’s leading designer, manufacturer, integrator and provider of advanced training technologies. For over 20 years, my company has provided the worldwide live combat training community with training systems, products and capabilities that are innovative, reliable, scalable and highly realistic to meet the user’s training requirements.

This can also be our biggest downfall. *What did the previous paragraph say?* What is found in the first paragraph of most proposals? Most companies start with their history, qualifications, appreciation or reverence. You must break of this practice and start with,

***“we can do it and this is how.”***

We want to begin our proposals with “yes” followed by a summary of how we will solve the customer’s problem. Use a combination of text and graphics. Combining professional text and graphics speeds communication, improves understanding, and increases the likelihood of success by 43% (according to a 1986 study by 3M and the University of Minnesota). Start with a paragraph that states we can do it and this is how. Immediately follow up with a high-level visual of how we will deliver our solution.

# WRITING THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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|  | **The Executive Summary’s job is to sell our product, our services, our ideas in a few sentences.** |
| * The executive summary is about the customer NOT us. * Stories are far more memorable and influential compared with stray facts or stitched sentences. * One graphic needs to replace “a thousand words”… * Dare to be audacious by giving them a reason to select our company. * Do not write one word of the executive summary without first knowing the “elevator pitch.” | |

Before the first page is finished the reader knows if they’re going to enjoy reading this bid, and they are also more than halfway towards deciding if they want to work with us. Bring our personality into our bid from the first line and keep that running right through every bit of the bid. That means using language which engages the reader, and showing our enthusiasm for the bid when talking about the things which are important to us.

This is a summary. That means the reader should be able to use this as a guide to the rest of the bid. It should be clear from reading this what the key elements of our offering are.

It should also be clear from the summary what’s different about our bid. This is about seeding the mind of the reader, so when they come to each question they are already looking for the great bits. If we’ve structured our answers properly we should be clearly showing the unique benefit we bring to each requirement of the bid, so it’s pretty easy to pull them all together and weave them into this section.

Remember, detail can come later in the actual proposal. What’s important is that we know later on in the bid the reader will be hearing about something so brilliant we want to tell them now in this summary so they know to look out for it.

So you’re going to tell the customer our value statement, what we are going to do, and why it’s all great, and every word will be vibrating with our personality. Now comes the tricky part; we can’t use more than a page or two to do all this. We have to embed all those important ideas into the reader’s head before they know what’s going on, and those first few hundred words are crucial.

If they place our bid next to someone else’s then that first page should sit there screaming out why we are the best, without any need to cross reference or read on. We know that in that first page the reader is deciding if they like us and want to work with us, if we are a contender but need to tell them more, or if they are in for a very dull few hours of reading. We want to win in the first few lines and then use the rest of the bid to help reinforce their decision, and these are just a few of the ways we can do that.

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|  | **The following three part formula is the easiest guide to laying out our response.** |
| **1.** **Open with a value statement.** “Customer will get (fill in the blank) when customer selects our company.” This approach has its roots in rule 17 from Dale Carnegie’s Golden Book:  "Do your best to always look at the opportunity from the customer’s point of view (What’s in it for him/her).”  **2. Draw a picture of the future.** Provide an illustration of the to-be state that the customer will realize at completion. Use a few words to describe what the picture shows. The customer will generate their own interpretation, but it helps to get them thinking in the right direction.  **3. Close with instructions to the reader.** Tell the reader where they will find the key aspects of our proposal that will prove that we will deliver the value. | |

# 2.1 CUSTOMER FOCUS

Put yourself in your future customer’s shoes. ***The executive summary is about the customer NOT us.*** Nothing will turn off the reader more than opening up a bid to generic corporate waffle. The only information about us worth sharing is specifically related to how we will solve our customer’s problem. The customer does not care that our company was founded in 1951 if it is not a step in the executive summary level solution.

Start and end with the customer. Begin with their needs and challenges and end with the perfect solution. The client should be the focus from planning and early sales/capture activity to the delivery of the proposal so the graphic depiction should also start and end with the customer.

# 2.2 TELL A STORY

Facts tell and stories sell. Stories are far more memorable and influential compared with stray facts or stitched sentences. Use a graphic metaphor, analogy or simile to tell the story of our solution. Walk the reader, step-by-step, through our solution. Start at the beginning and end with the solution. Choose our narrative and graphic(s) based on the audience.

Put our most important and compelling statement at the beginning of the executive summary so it is more likely to be read. The best proposals have a story to tell, a central narrative that weaves all proposal elements into a cohesive message. The basic storyline usually involves linking the customer’s concerns, needs, and aspirations with what our company has to offer. As you write, speak directly to the audience and don't be afraid to show our passion and excitement in the executive summary.

Provide substantiation. Give the key reasons why our company is the right company to deliver the solution. Here's where we can differentiate ourselves—highlight a unique methodology, for instance, or provide a quick case study of our past work. Include testimonials from satisfied customers. Just don't get carried away and turn the focus away from the potential customer and onto our company. "It's not about our company—it's about the customer."

# 2.3 USE OF GRAPHICS

Yes, a typical proposal may be a primarily technical document with heavy emphasis on compliance (especially in our arena). But, there is no rule saying the executive summary has to lack creativity or an infusion of marketing messaging, compelling visuals and business graphics that reflect our company’s brand essence and positioning.

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| * ***Executive summaries that incorporate a key visual element (such as a logo or graphic) make the proposal stand out.*** * ***Develop graphics that are relevant to the proposal’s overall message and have substantive meaning.*** * ***The graphics that work best are ones that add to the story. If the graphics don’t add to the story, save the space.*** * ***Each selected visual should be able to stand-alone and send its own message in lieu of words.*** * ***Each graphic used should make a single point.*** |

The secret to a winning executive summary is to empathize with our customer. What do they care most about? Show them our solution in the beginning and, as quickly as possible, give them an overview of it. Graphics communicate up to 60,000 times faster than text alone, quickly show our professionalism and commitment to the project, and greatly influence the decision maker.

A picture is worth a thousand words, even in an executive summary. If you have a graph, chart or other graphic that demonstrates one of the important points you're including in your executive summary, use it to support our key statements. You can use formatting such as subheadings, bullets and short paragraphs to make your executive summary easy to scan through and to draw attention to the most important parts.

There are three basic graphic types used in most winning executive summaries. They are as follows:

1. Literal graphic. Literally show our solution.
2. Parts to a whole. Show how each part of our solution connects to deliver the solution.
3. Process diagram. Walk the evaluator through the process one step at a time.

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| infographic |
| Figure 2.3-1. Three basic graphic types. *A well-placed graphic illustrating the precise nature of the customer's problem could drive home the point of the summary.* |

These graphic types work together and are not absolute. While graphical images can make a page interesting and can convey more information using less page real estate than text, there are factors to consider. Readers can absorb complex data more easily if it is translated into diagrams or ‘information graphics’. A well designed graphical image may be more readily recognized and clearer than its associated words.

# 2.4 USE OF CALLOUT BOXES

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| * 100% COTS/NDI solution provides a proven low risk solution * Our company provides proven early and on-time delivery with accelerated schedules * Our company brings a rich legacy of experience with our zzzzz history * Reduced Life Cycle Cost – efficient modular design and common interfaces to reduce the cost impact of future software upgrades, technology refresh and obsolescence |

Make Benefits Stand Out—Emphasize positive ideas such as low risk and high benefits through the use of call out boxes, sidebars, theme statements and pull quotes. The principle behind the callout is simple but very powerful. Call-out boxes highlight key take-aways.

Callouts/pull quotes are the single most important point on any particular page. Callouts are often one of the first things noticed on any page of a white paper. In part, callouts are noticed because the text sits alone in an open white space within the sidebar margins. On another level, callouts often use larger font sizes than the main text, which means they have a higher likelihood of being noticed and read, leading to greater reader engagement.

By taking a sentence that would otherwise go unnoticed if left buried within a standard paragraph, highlighting that sentence within the callout box using either larger fonts, shading, design or graphic supplements, will transform it into the first item noticed on the entire page. If chosen appropriately, the callout plays an important role as to whether the reader reads more of the executive summary content or casts the paper aside in favor of something else (such as another executive summary) that does a better job in attracting reader attention.

Choosing callouts that contain numbers and/or statistics can have an even greater impact on influencing reader decision making. For some strange reason, numbers seem to carry an air of authority and build greater credibility making solution messages more believable. Callouts are powerful statements in their own right that are made more powerful by the inclusion of numbers that are prominently featured as the first item.

By formatting each callout in this consistent fashion, the overall credibility and believability of the executive summary content is heightened and improved.

# 2.5 DARE TO BE AUDACIOUS

Evaluators are just like you and me. They make quick judgments based on what they see and read. As Deputy Program Manager at MARCORSYSCOM I read hundreds of proposals. Most proposals I evaluated were a paint-by-numbers response to the RFP—and little else. They were often prepared by multiple writers who have made too little effort to define a common thread among their individual contributions. The results come off as piecemeal and unfocused. It is very easy to spot “cut and paste” in proposals. This immediately gives the reader an excuse to downgrade your solution. As an evaluator you are constantly looking for those tidbits that set a proposal apart from the rest.

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| ***We say our company is the best-of-the-best. If so, our proposal better prove it.*** |

Make the "grab" shine. Be audacious. This section is probably the most important part of your entire executive summary. In two or three sentences you should tell the reader why our solution is special. Why does it deserve the scrutiny, business, or partnership of the people reading the summary?

We say our company is the best-of-the-best. If so, our proposal better prove it. Poor graphics (made by untrained designers using clip art, bad colors, with inconsistent or common graphics) and bad writing (written by untrained writers with bad spelling and grammar, hard-to-follow descriptions using passive language) scream that our company might be unprofessional, unreliable and may fail to deliver.

Compelling is a proposal term that describes how convincing or persuasive the proposal is. In government procurements, they expect the proposal to meet the solicitation requirements fully and exceed those requirements, where practical, in a way that is beneficial to the customer. There should be many features in the proposal that demonstrate a high likelihood of contract success or that exceed solicitation requirements. ***Assertions about company performance and claims about solution features should be substantiated by real evidence, not boastful rhetoric.*** Features with relevant and substantiated benefits, presented persuasively, provide the basis for selecting one bidder’s proposal over another.

Taking the extra effort to develop professional, compelling content and graphics is *expected*. Failing to include proposal experts means that saving money is more important than winning.

# 2.6 COMPLIANCE

Do not bury your compliance statements, approach, capabilities or substantiating with unsolicited/unrelated information. If the government didn’t require it, didn’t instruct you to discuss it, and didn’t disclose an intention to evaluate it, it typically isn’t important.

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| ***The easiest way to lose points during an evaluation is to not follow the instructions or not address the evaluation criteria.*** |

The proposal’s structure is expected to follow the request for proposal’s instructions (section L of the RFP) and also track with the evaluation criteria (section M). This includes the executive summary. Not meeting RFP requirements is the most prevalent reason used by evaluators to reject proposals. Therefore, meeting each and every requirement specified in a RFP is critical to a winning proposal. The easiest way to lose points during an evaluation is to not follow the instructions or not address the evaluation criteria.

With a goal of full compliance for every proposal submission, keep the following four steps in mind for all compliance issues.

1. Under each requirement being addressed, affirm your full compliance with the requirement.

2. Next, present how you will comply with the requirement.

3. Then, comment on your capabilities enabling you to comply.

4. Finally, substantiate your claims.

# 2.7 KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

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| ***Too often the executive summary is a cut-and-paste job and it shows. Keep in mind, it is very important to create the executive summary as a compelling synopsis, and not as an afterthought.*** |

Stop writing! Do not write one word of the executive summary without first knowing the “elevator pitch.” Everyone involved with the executive summary must have a one-sentence story that will echo throughout the executive summary and resonate with our customer. Most writers will write without a solid, feel-it-in-your-gut understanding of the solution. Our team’s productivity will suffer if we cannot quickly and clearly summarize the executive summary in one sentence. (Our one-sentence story is the executive summary action caption.) You want to know exactly what you want to say—at a highest level—before you write one word of the executive summary.

Independent research says when we are given too much information we tend to focus on the wrong data, which leads to poor decisions. The key is to give decision makers and evaluators what they need as quickly as possible. Make it blindingly clear and easy to understand.

We want our reader’s first impression to be that our company cares about the documents and, therefore, the proposal. Chances are that will convey the message that our company is the type of company that also cares about the solutions that we deliver.

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WIN STRATEGIES AND THEMES

All successful capture pursuits have to have a sound strategy, just like sports competitions or military campaigns. Win strategies help our company run a pursuit in a way that separates us from the pack of our competitors. Essentially, we have to be able to articulate what will enable us to win. Our win strategy has to be written in a succinct set of statements, reviewed regularly to make sure it is still accurate, and adjusted as necessary.

We are normally taught to define the strategy first, then the tactics. So, intuitively, many think that one has to start with defining the win strategy first, and then you would develop action items (the tactics) to enact it. The actions that will enable us to implement this win strategy, with clear priorities, deadlines, and targets assigned to each task.

After this is all set and done, right before the RFP hits the street, or while we are preparing a proposal, the approach is to develop the win themes that are reflective of the win strategy, as a separate but related exercise. Win themes are recurring statements throughout the proposal that convey to the customer why our proposal should win, help our customer remember our proposal while they might read multiple others, and even lend them the language to justify to others why they want to award this proposal to our company.

This traditional approach works sometimes, but it takes twice as long to implement. In many cases, the results are nothing to write home about—with win themes completely out of sync with win strategies. The secret of developing powerful win strategies that shine through our win themes and make our proposals more persuasive is counterintuitive: Start with developing win themes, not win strategies; win strategies will fall out of the action items that our win themes will drive.

The way we derive good strategies is to come up with win themes, and perform a gap analysis in the process. If we cannot come up with a reason to select our company for every evaluation criterion, every area of scope, and every customer desire, we need to honestly assess: Do we actually have the capability to provide the desired benefit our customer seeks? If yes, make sure we state the benefit, the feature, and prove it. If not, we have to come up with a strategy to obtain that capability, and figure out what actions will get us there. This is the inverted relationship between the win themes and win strategies. In other words, if we cannot come up with a complete win theme, we should create a win strategy, and not the other way around.

Look for places in the proposal to creatively infuse and visually depict marketing messages (or, in proposal speak, “win themes”). The win strategies and win themes we develop will determine whether or not our proposal is funded. It is that simple. If reviewers cannot quickly understand what are the main themes of our proposal and find them compelling, our proposal probably will receive a low evaluation score.

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|  | **Develop win strategies and theme statements before you begin outlining and writing, and our proposals will be more focused, persuasive, and compelling.** |
| * Step 1: **Focus on the Issues**   Make a list of the most pressing issues (hot buttons) our customer is facing. This list should be longer rather than shorter.   * Step 2: **Analyze our Capability**   Once we have a list, analyze our company’s ability to meet them. If we have too many issues that cannot be addressed, we should not bid on the contract opportunity.   * Step 3: **Find your Discriminators**   Once we have decided to bid, make a list of discriminators that shows our competitors and their ability to address the issues. We are trying to determine our own gaps and those of our competitors, which will matter to the customer.   * Step 4: **Identify Strategies**   Now we need to identify four basic strategies: (1) mitigate our weaknesses; (2) address our competitors’ strengths; (3) highlight our own strengths; and (4) ghost our competitors’ weaknesses. Identify those strategies that are likely to work for us.   * Step 5: **Choose our Themes**   Develop our win themes based on our strategies. Each win theme must answer a simple but tough question: *So what?*   * Step 6: **Develop our Theme Statements**   Turn our win themes into statements to use in our proposal. Our win themes should address the following: goals, issues, features, benefits, and proofs. Every win theme must show how our solution will benefit the customer.   * Step 7: **Weave our Win Themes into the Proposal**   When we outline the proposal and develop our storyboards, weave our win themes into the Executive Summary, call-out boxes, major sections, and action captions for pictures. These win themes will serve as the scaffolding of our proposal. | |

# DISCRIMINATORS

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| * ***Cite the issues (hot buttons) that are important to the customer.*** * ***Cite the benefits of your solution before the features.*** * ***Validate, validate, validate! Do not make claims you cannot prove.*** * ***Each Proposal Section should strive to have at least a single discriminator*** |

Discriminators are features of our offering that benefit the customer in ways that our competitors do not. It should be unique to you, important to your customer, and one that you can convince your customer that you can and will deliver at an acceptable cost.

Discriminators are unique or positive attributes of your company, such as your technical methods, company experience, personnel qualifications, existing products, or research and development accomplishments. They assert that our company, and therefore our proposal, is the best available, and they establish proposal themes and approaches.

Emphasize discriminators that focus on people, experience, performance and understanding of the customer’s problem. They are usually the most compelling discriminators.

***State our competitive advantage.*** Assuming we have a clear competitive advantage, take the description a step further and communicate how our company plans to sustain that advantage. Make it obvious why our offer is better than the others.

**Provide substantiation.** Give the key reasons why our company is the right company to deliver the solution. Here’s where you can differentiate yourself—highlight a unique methodology, for instance, or provide a quick case study of your past work.

***Present bottom-line benefits.*** Describe some form of a monetary, time, or resource gain that can be spelled out in greater detail later in the proposal. This doesn’t mean giving away all of our solution advantages up front, however, it does mean providing enough information that will entice evaluators to read the rest of the proposal and find out what those benefits are.

The definition of discriminators requires that you identify the strengths and weaknesses of your competition. This why understanding our competition before we respond to a competitive RFP is so important. Discriminators are those points that answer the questions "Why is my proposal the best response to the RFP requirements?" and "Why should I be selected rather than my competition?"

# 4.1 GHOSTING THE COMPETITION

Ghosting the competition is a way to incorporate our unique selling proposition. This is where we elaborate on our unique solution. What specifically gives our company’s product or service an advantage over the competition?

Most likely, the customer has already seen multiple plans with similar solutions. Identify our sustainable competitive advantage, like unique benefits, cost savings, or industry ties. Don’t kill our credibility by saying we have no competition. At minimum, we compete with the way things get done currently. In some cases, we may have name recognition with the customer, but there is always a competitor ready to go the extra mile to out-shine us.

# PROOFREADING

Reread your summary. When you have written the basics, reread it carefully. You should proofread the summary with extra care. While you are rereading, also consider the audience for the document. Make sure any new references are explained and that the language will be clear to someone who is new to this topic. Rewrite as necessary.

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|  | **Have a pair of fresh eyes reread your executive summary, paying special attention to:** |
| * **Clarity.** Are the words clear, the ideas clearer, and the summary devoid of jargon? * **Errors.** Grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors may abound. Having someone fact-check the figures and statistics might be a good ideal as well. * **Forcefulness.** Do the ideas translate into a stirring pitch? Where does the pitch fall flat, if at all? * **Coherence.** What parts don't fit together? What parts do? | |

If you have someone with a fresh set of eyes and a keen attention to detail available, ask them to proofread your executive summary for typos. All reviews also should focus on a three-stage process of revision: (1) be clear; (2) be concise; and (3) be correct and compliant with the RFP.

# SUMMARY

The old adage, “you only get one chance to make a first impression” carries a lot of meaning when it comes to the executive summary. The executive summary will be the most read and widely distributed section of our RFP submission. It is the single component of our submission that serves to convince decision-makers to learn more about our company and the solution being offered.

Write with an Eye to the Audience. The executive summary needs to be well conceived and written in a style that is easy to understand. It must be concise, interesting and believable. You want your summary to reflect an exciting—and achievable—opportunity. Thus the executive summary demands a whole different approach to writing than the rest of the proposal, one that balances efficient delivery of key information with a persuasive, well-substantiated pitch.

*“Writing is much more than putting words on a page – writing is a reflection of your thinking and strategy. Like it or not, your competency is based on the quality of your writing.”*

***Tom Potendyk***

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