

Guide to Writing Your Business Plan

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www.sba.gov/starting-business/write-your-business-plan

I. Executive Summary

The executive summary is often considered the most important section of a business plan. This section briefly tells your reader where your company is, where you want to take it, and why your business idea will be successful. If you are seeking financing, the executive summary is also your first opportunity to grab a potential investor's interest. The executive summary should highlight the strengths of your overall plan and therefore be the last section you write. However, it usually appears first in your business plan document.

Write your Executive Summary LAST, after you have completed the rest of the business plan. That way, you'll have thought through all the elements of your startup and be prepared to summarize them.

What to Include in Your Executive Summary

Below are several key points that your executive summary should include based on the stage of your business.

If You Are an Established Business

If you are an established business, be sure to include the following information:

- **The Mission Statement** – This explains what your business is all about. It should be between several sentences and a paragraph.
- **Company Information** – Include a short statement that covers when your business was formed, the names of the founders and their roles, your number of employees, and your business location(s).
- **Growth Highlights** – Include examples of company growth, such as financial or market highlights (for example, "XYZ Firm increased profit margins and market share year-over-year since its foundation). Graphs and charts can be helpful in this section.
- **Your Products/Services** – Briefly describe the products or services you provide.
- **Financial Information** – If you are seeking financing, include any information about your current bank and investors.
- **Summarize future plans** – Explain where you would like to take your business.

With the exception of the mission statement, all of the information in the executive summary should be covered in a concise fashion and kept to one page. The executive summary is the first part of your business plan many people will see, so each word should count.

If You Are a Startup or New Business

If you are just starting a business, you won't have as much information as an established company. Instead, focus on your experience and background as well as the decisions that led you to start this particular enterprise. Demonstrate that you have done thorough market analysis. Include information about a need or gap in your target market, and how your particular solutions can fill it. Convince the reader that you can succeed in your target market, then address your future plans. Remember, your Executive Summary will be the last thing you write. So the first section of the business plan that you will tackle is the Company Description section.

II. Company Description

This section of your business plan provides a high-level review of the different elements of your business. This is akin to an extended elevator pitch and can help readers and potential investors quickly understand the goal of your business and its unique proposition.

What to Include in Your Company Description

- Describe the nature of your business and list the marketplace needs that you are trying to satisfy.
- Explain how your products and services meet these needs.
- List the specific consumers, organizations or businesses that your company serves or will serve.
- Explain the competitive advantages that you believe will make your business a success such as your location, expert personnel, efficient operations, or ability to bring value to your customers.

III. Products and Service

This section expands on the basic information about your products and services included in the Executive Summary and Company Description.

Here are some items to consider:

- **Your company's products and/or services:** What do you sell, and how is it manufactured or provided? Include details of relationships with suppliers, manufacturers and/or partners that are essential to delivering the product or service to customers.
- **The problem the product or service solves:** Every business needs to solve a problem that its customers face. Explain what the problem is and how your product or service solves it. What are its benefits, features and unique selling proposition? Yours won't be the only solution (every business has competitors), but you need to explain why your solution is better than the

others, targets a customer base your competitors are ignoring, or has some other characteristic that gives it a competitive edge.

- **Any proprietary features that give you a competitive advantage:** Do you have a patent on your product or a patent pending? Do you have exclusive agreements with suppliers or vendors to sell a product or service that none of your competitors sell? Do you have the license for a product, technology or service that's in high demand and/or short supply?
- **How you will price your product or service:** Describe the pricing, fee, subscription or leasing structure of your product or service. How does your product or service fit into the competitive landscape in terms of pricing—are you on the low end, mid-range or high end? How will that pricing strategy help you attract customers? What is your projected profit margin?

IV. Market Analysis

The market analysis section of your business plan should illustrate your industry and market knowledge as well as any of your research findings and conclusions. This section is usually presented after the products and services.

What to Include in Your Market Analysis

- **Industry Description and Outlook** – Describe your industry, including its current size and historic growth rate as well as other trends and characteristics (e.g., life cycle stage, projected growth rate). Next, list the major customer groups within your industry.
- **Information About Your Target Market** – Narrow your target market to a manageable size. Many businesses make the mistake of trying to appeal to too many target markets. Research and include the following information about your market:
- **Distinguishing characteristics** – What are the critical needs of your potential customers? Are those needs being met? What are the demographics of the group and where are they located? Are there any seasonal or cyclical purchasing trends that may impact your business?
- **Size of the primary target market** – In addition to the size of your market, what data can you include about the annual purchases to quantify the revenue potential of your market? What is the forecasted market growth for this group?
- **How much market share can you gain?** – What is the market share percentage and number of customers you expect to obtain in a defined geographic area? Explain the logic behind your calculation.
- **Pricing and gross margin targets** – Define your pricing structure, gross margin levels, and any discount that you plan to use.
- When you include information about any of the market tests or research studies you have completed, be sure to focus only on the results of these tests. Any other details should be included in the appendix.
- **Competitive Analysis** – Your competitive analysis should identify your competition by product line or service and market segment. Assess the following characteristics of the competitive landscape:
 - Market share
 - Strengths and weaknesses
 - How important is your target market to your competitors?
 - Are there any barriers that may hinder you as you enter the market?
 - What is your window of opportunity to enter the market?
 - Are there any indirect or secondary competitors who may impact your success?
 - What barriers to market are there (e.g., changing technology, high investment cost, lack of quality personnel)?
- **Regulatory Restrictions** – Include any customer or governmental regulatory requirements affecting your business, and how you'll comply. Also, cite any operational or cost impact the compliance process will have on your business.

V. Organization & Management

This section should include: your company's organizational structure, details about the ownership of your company, profiles of your management team, and the qualifications of your board of directors. Who does what in your business? What is their background and why are you bringing them into the business as board members or employees? What are they responsible for? These may seem like unnecessary questions to answer in a one- or two-person organization, but the people reading your business plan want to know who's in charge, so tell them. Give a detailed description of each division or department and its function.

This section should include who's on the board (if you have an advisory board) and how you intend to keep them there. What kind of salary and benefits package do you have for your people? What incentives are you offering? How about promotions? Reassure your reader that the people you have on staff are more than just names on a letterhead.

Organizational Structure

A simple but effective way to lay out the structure of your company is to create an organizational chart with a narrative description. This will prove that you're leaving nothing to chance, you've thought out exactly who is doing what, and there is someone in charge of every function of your company. Nothing will fall through the cracks, and nothing will be done three or four times over. To a potential investor or employee, that is very important.

Ownership Information

This section should also include the legal structure of your business along with the subsequent ownership information it relates to. Have you incorporated your business? If so, is it a C or S corporation? Or perhaps you have formed a partnership with someone. If so, is it a general or limited partnership? Or maybe you are a sole proprietor.

The following important ownership information should be incorporated into your business plan:

- Names of owners
- Percentage ownership
- Extent of involvement with the company
- Forms of ownership (i.e., common stock, preferred stock, general partner, limited partner)
- Outstanding equity equivalents (i.e., options, warrants, convertible debt)
- Common stock (i.e., authorized or issued)
- Management Profiles
- Experts agree that one of the strongest factors for success in any growth company is the ability and track record of its owner/management team, so let your reader know about the key people in your company and their backgrounds. Provide resumes that include the following information:
 - Name
 - Position (include brief position description along with primary duties)
 - Primary responsibilities and authority
 - Education
 - Unique experience and skills
 - Prior employment
 - Special skills
 - Past track record
 - Industry recognition
 - Community involvement
 - Number of years with company
 - Compensation basis and levels (make sure these are reasonable -- not too high or too low)
 - Be sure you quantify achievements (e.g. "Managed a sales force of ten people," "Managed a department of fifteen people," "Increased revenue by 15 percent in the first six months," "Expanded the retail outlets at the rate of two each year," "Improved the customer service as rated by our customers from a 60 percent to a 90 percent rating")

Also highlight how the people surrounding you complement your own skills. If you're just starting out, show how each person's unique experience will contribute to the success of your venture

Board of Directors' Qualifications

The major benefit of an unpaid advisory board is that it can provide expertise that your company cannot otherwise afford. A list of well-known, successful business owners/managers can go a long way toward enhancing your company's credibility and perception of management expertise.

If you have a board of directors, be sure to gather the following information when developing the outline for your business plan:

- Names
- Positions on the board
- Extent of involvement with company
- Background
- Historical and future contribution to the company's success

Service or Product Line

The next part of your business plan is where you describe your service or product, emphasizing the benefits to potential and current customers. Focus on why your particular product will fill a need for your target customers.

What to Include in Your Service or Product Line Section

A Description of Your Product / Service

Include information about the specific benefits of your product or service – from your customers' perspective. You should also talk about your product or service's ability to meet consumer needs, any advantages your product has over that of the competition, and the current development stage your product is in (e.g., idea, prototype).

Details About Your Product's Life Cycle

Be sure to include information about where your product or service is in its life cycle, as well as any factors that may influence its cycle in the future.

Intellectual Property

If you have any existing, pending, or any anticipated copyright or patent filings, list them here. Also disclose whether any key aspects of a product may be classified as trade secrets. Last, include any information pertaining to existing legal agreements, such as nondisclosure or non-compete agreements.

Research and Development (R&D) Activities

Outline any R&D activities that you are involved in or are planning. What results of future R&D activities do you expect? Be sure to analyze the R&D efforts of not only your own business, but also of others in your industry.

Marketing & Sales

The next part of your business plan should focus on your marketing and sales management strategy for your business.

Marketing is the process of creating customers, and customers are the lifeblood of your business. In this section, the first thing you want to do is define your marketing strategy. There is no single way to approach a marketing strategy; your strategy should be part of an ongoing business-evaluation process and unique to your company. However, there are common steps you can follow which will help you think through the direction and tactics you would like to use to drive sales and sustain customer loyalty.

An **overall marketing strategy** should include four different strategies:

- A market penetration strategy.
- A growth strategy. This strategy for building your business might include: an internal strategy such as how to increase your human resources, an acquisition strategy such as buying another business, a franchise strategy for branching out, a horizontal strategy where you would provide the same type of products to different users, or a vertical strategy where you would continue providing the same products but would offer them at different levels of the distribution chain.
- Channels of distribution strategy. Choices for distribution channels could include original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), an internal sales force, distributors, or retailers.
- Communication strategy. How are you going to reach your customers? Usually a combination of the following tactics works the best: promotions, advertising, public relations, personal selling, and printed materials such as brochures, catalogs, flyers, etc.

After you have developed a comprehensive marketing strategy, you can then define your sales strategy. This covers how you plan to actually sell your product.

Your **overall sales strategy** should include two primary elements:

- A sales force strategy. If you are going to have a sales force, do you plan to use internal or independent representatives? How many salespeople will you recruit for your sales force? What type of recruitment strategies will you use? How will you train your sales force? What about compensation for your sales force?
- Your sales activities. When you are defining your sales strategy, it is important that you break it down into activities. For instance, you need to identify your prospects. Once you have made a list of your prospects, you need to prioritize the contacts, selecting the leads with the highest potential to buy first. Next, identify the number of sales calls you will make over a certain period of time. From there, you need to determine the average number of sales calls you will need to make per sale, the average dollar size per sale, and the average dollar size per vendor.

Funding Request

If you are seeking funding for your business venture, use this section to outline your requirements.

Your funding request should include the following information:

- Your current funding requirement
- Any future funding requirements over the next five years
- How you intend to use the funds you receive: Is the funding request for capital expenditures? Working capital? Debt retirement? Acquisitions? Whatever it is, be sure to list it in this section.
- Any strategic financial situational plans for the future, such as: a buyout, being acquired, debt repayment plan, or selling your business. These areas are extremely important to a future creditor, since they will directly impact your ability to repay your loan(s).

When you are outlining your funding requirements, include the amount you want now and the amount you want in the future. Also include the time period that each request will cover, the type of funding you would like to have (e.g., equity, debt), and the terms that you would like to have applied.

To support your funding request you'll also need to provide historical and prospective financial information.

Financial Projections

Financial Projections

You should develop the Financial Projections section after you've analyzed the market and set clear objectives. That's when you can allocate resources efficiently. The following is a list of the critical financial statements to include in your business plan packet.

Historical Financial Data

If you own an established business, you will be requested to supply historical data related to your company's performance. Most creditors request data for the last three to five years, depending on the length of time you have been in business.

The historical financial data to include are your company's income statements, balance sheets, and cash flow statements for each year you have been in business (usually for up to three to five years). Often, creditors are also interested in any collateral that you may have that could be used to ensure your loan, regardless of the stage of your business.

Prospective Financial Data

All businesses, whether startup or growing, will be required to supply prospective financial data. Most of the time, creditors will want to see what you expect your company to be able to do within the next five years. Each year's documents should include forecasted income statements, balance sheets, cash flow statements, and capital expenditure budgets. For the first year, you should supply monthly or quarterly projections. After that, you can stretch it to quarterly and/or yearly projections for years two through five.

Make sure that your projections match your funding requests; creditors will be on the lookout for inconsistencies. It's much better if you catch mistakes before they do. If you have made assumptions in your projections, be sure to summarize what you have assumed. This way, the reader will not be left guessing.

Finally, include a short analysis of your financial information. Include a ratio and trend analysis for all of your financial statements (both historical and prospective). Since pictures speak louder than words, you may want to add graphs of your trend analysis (especially if they are positive).

Appendix

The Appendix should be provided to readers on an as-needed basis. In other words, it should not be included with the main body of your business plan. Your plan is your communication tool; as such, it will be seen by a lot of people. Some of the information in the business section you will not want everyone to see, but specific individuals (such as creditors) may want access to this information to make lending decisions. Therefore, it is important to have the appendix within easy reach.

The appendix would include:

- Credit history (personal & business)
- Resumes of key managers
- Product pictures
- Letters of reference
- Details of market studies
- Relevant magazine articles or book references
- Licenses, permits or patents
- Legal documents
- Copies of leases
- Building permits
- Contracts
- List of business consultants, including attorney and accountant

Any copies of your business plan should be controlled; keep a distribution record. This will allow you to update and maintain your business plan on an as-needed basis. Remember, too, that you should include a private placement disclaimer with your business plan if you plan to use it to raise capital.

How to Make Your Business Plan Stand Out

One of the first steps to business planning is determining your target market and why they would want to buy from you.

For example, is the market you serve the best one for your product or service? Are the benefits of dealing with your business clear and are they aligned with customer needs? If you're unsure about the answers to any of these questions, take a step back and revisit the foundation of your business plan.

The following tips can help you clarify what your business has to offer, identify the right target market for it and build a niche for yourself.

Be Clear About What You Have to Offer

Ask yourself: Beyond basic products or services, what are you really selling? Consider this example: Your town probably has several restaurants all selling one fundamental product—food. But each is targeted at a different need or clientele.

One might be a drive-thru fast food restaurant, perhaps another sells pizza in a rustic Italian kitchen, and maybe there's a fine dining seafood restaurant that specializes in wood-grilled fare. All these restaurants sell meals, but they sell them to targeted clientele looking for the unique qualities each has to offer. What they are *really* selling is a combination of product, value, ambience and brand experience.

When starting a business, be sure to understand what makes your business unique. What needs does your product or service fulfill? What benefits and differentiators will help your business stand out from the crowd?

Don't Become a Jack of All Trades-Learn to Strategize

It's important to clearly define what you're selling. You do not want to become a jack-of-all trades and master of none because this can have a negative impact on business growth. As a smaller business, it's often a better strategy to divide your products or services into manageable market niches. Small operations can then offer specialized goods and services that are attractive to a specific group of prospective buyers.

Identify Your Niche

Creating a niche for your business is essential to success. Often, business owners can identify a niche based on their own market knowledge, but it can also be helpful to conduct a market survey with potential customers to uncover untapped needs. During your research process, identify the following:

- Which areas your competitors are already well-established
- Which areas are being ignored by your competitors
- Potential opportunities for your business