Bottomline Upfront [BLUF]

Idea In Short

A BLUF (bottom line up front) is a framework where the essential information is placed at the beginning of the text, rather than the end. The BLUF framework makes you more credible. You will sound more crisp and confident. That sends a powerful signal that you know your stuff. The BLUF is similar to an elevator speech. It needs to be a quick summary in 30 seconds or less - about the time you have to tell your story to a listener while traveling a few floors on an elevator. However, don't mistake short duration with being easy to accomplish. It's difficult to come up with a good elevator speech. It's very worth the effort, but there are no shortcuts.

This is an incredible — albeit sad — example of BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front) in action. Right before the Titanic sank at around 1:00 a.m. on 15thApril, 1912, somebody sent the following telegram:

> CQD CQD SOS SOS = FROM MGY (RMS TITANIC) = WE HAVE STRUCK ICEBERG = SINKING FAST = COME TO OUR ASSISTANCE = POSITION: LAT 41.46 N. = LON 50.14 W. MGY

Origins

Good writing skills are essential to advance in the US military — and there's one technique military leaders follow to make their emails clear, concise, and compelling. BLUF — Bottom Line Up Front — is originally a military communications technique, in which the conclusion — the most vital information and actions — is placed right at the start. The Inverted Pyramid form of journalism borrows its technique from the US military. This format is valued for two reasons:

- First, the readers can leave the story at any point and understand it, even if they do

not have all the details
- Second, it conducts readers through the details of the story

The BLUF approach

Effective writing is understood easily and quickly. Don't frustrate your reader by hiding the main point. Put the bottom line up front, and your readers will appreciate it. This system also means that information less vital to the reader's understanding comes later in the story. It is easier to edit out less vital text to save space or for other reasons. This is called cutting from the bottom. According to the HBR article titled, How to Write Email with Military Precision:

> Military professionals lead their emails with a short, staccato statement known as the BLUF. (Yes, being the military, there is an acronym for everything.) It declares the purpose of the email and action required. The BLUF should quickly answer the five W's: who, what, where, when, and why. An effective BLUF distills the most important information for the reader. The BLUF helps readers quickly digest the announcement, decision, and when the new procedures go into effect. The reader doesn't necessarily want to know all the background information that led to the decision. He or she likely wants to know "how does this email affect me?" and the BLUF should answer this question every time.

Variants of BLUF

There are many methods to draw attention to the key parts of your writing, if that's your chosen form of communication. You can highlight key keywords, phrases, or sentences with colour or a bold font, and so on. When your documents are BLUF formatted, the recipient doesn't have to scan a long document to get the important items. Instead, they run into it right at the start. So, there's no way they can miss the key aspects you wish to convey. This framework also forces you to think what your key message is and succinctly phrase it. This results in better focus. Incidentally, BLUF isn't the only such system. You can also use the BLIND framework, especially on email-based applications:

- BL = Bottom Line
- I = Impact on the organization
- N = Next steps to be taken

- D = Details

However, BLUF is simpler and probably just as effective in most cases.

Why use BLUF?

Persuasive communicators know the power of stating their Bottom Line Up Front. They state their main point immediately and then back it up with the necessary evidence. Develop the habit and you are more likely to be heard, understood and believed. You are more likely to be heard because listeners' gnat-like attention spans are likely to be hijacked at any time. Take too long to get to your point and you will find that impatient listeners have already started thinking about something else. If they believe what you say, it doesn't matter so much if they tune out after they've heard your point. If they don't believe, it, they may at least pay close attention to the rest, if only to refute your point. It's like a newspaper article—even if you don't read the whole story, you get the gist of it from the headline. You can't convince others unless they understand you, and putting the bottom line up front helps here as well. First, it makes you think clearly about what you want to say; in order to give your bottom line up front, you have to know what your bottom line is. Although this may sound obvious, too many speakers ignore this rule. They launch their half-baked thoughts into a monologue and think through what they are saying as it comes out. That's where the ums and ahs, the irrelevancies and even the occasional contradiction come in, further confusing the listeners and taxing their patience. Sometimes more is actually less, because the added verbiage makes it harder for people to follow your thinking. Second, stating your main point up front gives the listener the big picture which they can then use to better organize the additional information that follows. For example, slides which use a headline containing the main point instead of a meaningless or ambiguous title, are shown to improve user comprehension and learning of the material. Finally, putting the bottom line up front makes you more credible. You will sound more crisp and confident, and that sends a powerful signal that you know your stuff.

Good practices

To get to a solid BLUF, there are a few good practices that you should follow:

1. Do your homework
2. Be thorough with your inputs

3. Understand your audience

Do your homework

This is the part where there are no shortcuts. You must understand the whole picture, from top to bottom, in order to do an effective job of beginning to synthesise it into a BLUF.

Be thorough with your inputs

This is an extension of the idea that there are no short cuts. Your analysis process must be thorough. You need to ensure that you are asking all of the questions. Make sure you are clear with the output of your analysis. In order even to begin to construct a BLUF, you need to understand all aspects of your analysis. You need to understand the critical success factors, the risks, the assumptions, and so on.

Understand your audience

It is most critical that you understand what is important to your audience. You need to hit the key pressure points head on. Understand exactly what you want to get out of this application. You need to have an objective with the BLUF. It needs to be simple and measurable. The BLUF needs to speak exactly to your objective. A BLUF forces you to think through the important things and to see things as your stakeholders see them.

Summary

US military puts a lot of research into effective writing. They found that the most significant problem was failing to convey a focused message quickly. Many people bury the main point in lengthy, verbose and convoluted communications. The BLUF framework forces the writer to start with a clear and concise idea and communicate it upfront. For consultants, the BLUF framework is an invaluable framework to structure communications and persuade clients to take action by quickly driving home the essential points.