

Producing White Papers

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White papers are an important tool for communicating with technical decision-makers. They are widely used by companies marketing business-to-business and technology products. They should be clearly written and illustrated and may need the skills of a writer and editor, as well as a technical specialist. Making high-quality technical information available through white papers can strengthen customer relationships.

What You Need to Know

Are white papers a marketing tool?

White papers help people make decisions. In the IT sector, industry research indicates that around 70% of information technology professionals in the U.S. rely on white papers to make purchasing decisions. They are particularly valuable in the early stages of purchase when decision-makers are gathering information.

What to Do

Understand User Needs

In business, white papers provide information that enables readers to evaluate products, services, or technologies. In the IT sector for example, choosing the right technology has become critical to business success. Product evaluation has therefore become more intense, particularly on large-scale projects. Preparing a technical—and financial—justification is an extremely rigorous process. The detailed information available in white papers meets part of that research process, providing documentation that can guide and support decision-making.

Choose the Type of White Paper

White papers fall into a number of different categories, including:

- technology guides—explaining a product's technology, why the technology is important to potential customers, and how it is different from and better than similar technologies;
- position papers—explaining a trend, or technology;

- business guides—explaining the business and financial benefits of a product or service;
- competitive reviews—evaluating a company’s products and comparing them with similar competitive offerings;
- product guides—providing a detailed description and explanation of a product’s features and functionality;
- application guides—describing the application of a product or technology in a particular industry.

Set an Objective

Your white paper should have a specific objective. Possible objectives include:

- educating potential customers;
- providing a response to a request for technical information;
- informing decision-makers of key product features or benefits;
- supporting the introduction of a new technology or product feature;
- educating your own sales force or a distributor’s sales team who may not fully understand your product and its benefits;
- providing a background document for a press release or press conference;
- creating a fulfillment piece for advertisements, direct mail or Web Site campaigns, where readers register details to obtain a copy of the white paper;
- creating thought leadership and developing a preference for your company and its products.

Provide Information

A white paper should be a piece of information, not a sales document. A good test is to avoid mentioning your company or your product in the first half of the white paper. If prospects feel that you are trying to sell, rather than inform, the white paper becomes less valuable, and is treated as a marketing message. Your white paper should therefore review problems or needs faced by the reader, rather than describe a product or service offered by your company. You can also maintain the educational value of the paper by talking about your product in generic terms, rather than by brand name—products with these features help to overcome these issues, for example. If you take this approach, you can mention your product name at the end of the document in a “sign-off” which is separated from the main text of the document.

Write at the Appropriate Technical Level

Although white papers are regarded primarily as a medium for technical readers, it is important to write at the correct technical level. You should not assume that your readers will be familiar with technology, particularly if it is new technology. You should therefore avoid jargon and use charts, diagrams, or other forms of visual treatment to clarify complex ideas. Wherever possible, use industry-standard terminology, rather than your company's marketing language. A glossary of terms would be useful for complex products or services.

You should remember that white papers may also be read by nontechnical readers. If communicating with business decision-makers is one of your important objectives, you must ensure that the content is understandable to a nonspecialist audience. Some companies produce several versions of the same paper, with a description on the front cover such as "this publication is intended for technical readers" or "this publication is intended for executive decisions makers."

Appoint an Editor

Because the level of writing is so critical, you need to decide who should write the paper. Although the obvious candidate would be a technical specialist who is an expert in the subject, that person may not be capable of writing at the appropriate level. It may be more useful to appoint an editor to work with the expert, taking the expert's first draft and turning it into a document that meets the communications objectives and information needs of the target audience. The editor might be someone from your own marketing department or an independent editor/writer who is familiar with your industry.

The alternative is to commission an independent writer or consultant to produce the document, working with your technical team to source and check information. If the independent writer is recognized as an authority in your industry, that can add to the credibility and objectivity of your white paper.

Structure the Document

The title is an important element of a white paper. It should be informative, such as "A guide to XYZ," but should not promise more than it can deliver. At the beginning of the document, you should include an overview and a content list. The main body of the paper should set out the background to the paper and explain the issues and challenges facing the reader or the industry, before offering a description and justification of the solution. Depending on the subject, the paper could also include any relevant research material or case studies to support the recommendations. You should provide

a summary at the end of the paper, along with a list of related documents or sources of additional information

Create a Visually Interesting Document

As well as explaining complex concepts, photographs, charts and diagrams add visual interest to a document, making it more readable and increasing the likelihood of success. In the same way that the language must be clear and understandable, the graphic elements must be of a high standard. You may need to use the services of a graphic designer to produce material that is effective.

Make It Easy to Access Your White Paper

Because of their important role in purchasing decisions, white papers are now widely available as downloads on suppliers' Web Sites. The Internet has become a key medium for product research and white papers are an integral part of that process. This method enables you to distribute information to prospects in a very accessible and cost-effective way. You should make it easy for visitors to find your white papers.

- Create a library listing all the white papers available.
- Place links to white papers on pages where you describe relevant products or industry solutions.
- Place a list of white papers on your press information page.

Market Your White Paper

A white paper can form a valuable mailing piece to customers and prospects. Mailing it to customers keeps them up to date with the latest developments in your company. You can also send it to prospects in the same market sector to demonstrate your credibility. If you are running an advertising or direct mail campaign, a white paper makes a valuable and measurable call to action. Ask readers who request the white paper to provide contact details or complete a short questionnaire, giving you useful data for later follow-up by the sales team.

You can also distribute white papers through companies who specialize in syndicating white papers for a particular industry. These companies offer readers a wide range of material from different suppliers so that readers can compare different offerings. With syndication services, you pay the specialist to place your white paper on network Web Sites that coincide with your target audience. Make sure that the syndicator can match your target, ideally by job title and industry, for example, if you want to reach technical managers in the printing industry. The syndicator should also be able to provide you with data that indicates how your white paper campaigns are performing. This may

be simply the number of downloads, or you may get more precise information by job title or even by named company.

What to Avoid

You Write at the Wrong Level

It is essential that your white paper is produced by a competent writer or editor who can make highly complex technical information clearly understandable to your target audience.

If the paper is for a business management audience, it has to be written in a clear nontechnical way. For a technical audience, you need to provide full justification in language and terms that are used by the industry.

You Create a Marketing Document

Your white paper must have the feel of an independent, authoritative document. It should educate readers, not sell. If you use case studies to demonstrate key points, these should also be written in a “neutral” tone that does not make marketing claims.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Stelzner, Michael A., *Writing White Papers: How to Capture Readers And Keep Them Engaged*. WhitePaperSource Publishing, 2006.

Web Sites:

Writing White Papers: www.writingwhitepapers.com

WhitePaperSource: www.whitepapersource.com