How to Write Compelling White Papers (Your Audience Will Really Want to Read)

Longer than print ads, website copy, or case studies, white papers have the space (typically anywhere from 4 to 16 pages) to provide industry overviews, identify with the audience's issues or "pain points," present findings, propose a solution, and highlight the benefits of a product or service.

And white papers play a crucial role in the buying cycle of IT professionals, according to Bitpipe, a leading online source for white papers. A 2004 Bitpipe survey found that respondents downloaded, on average, 30 white papers per year. The survey also found that respondents passed white papers along to colleagues almost 70% of the time. Thirty-six percent of respondents contacted the company that published the white paper for more information, and roughly 35% forwarded the white papers to supervisors.

As the evidence shows, a white paper can be a powerful and persuasive marketing vehicle. Provided, of course, that the reader actually reads it.

Tips to Keep Readers Hooked

The biggest tip on hooking—and keeping—readers? Making your white paper informative and educational, and writing it in a positive, non-technical, and "non-salesy" style.

Here's the typical structure for a white paper, as well as a few pointers on how to keep readers interested:

- **The title** – This is your first chance to capture the reader's attention. So why waste it with a boring title? Certainly, you want the reader to understand what the white paper is about. But that doesn't mean there's no room for some punch or playfulness. Also, think benefits, not features, when you're coming up with a title. And consider using numbers in the title of your white paper (e.g., "Five Steps to Improving Your Bottom Line with Product X").

- **The abstract or executive summary** – This overview provides a short summary of what the paper is about. The abstract should offer enough detail to satisfy a busy executive, but it should also persuade that executive to read the rest of the white paper.

- **The introduction** – In the introduction, define the issue and provide background discussion as needed. This gives your white paper credibility, as it establishes common ground from which you and the reader can proceed.

- **The problem** – This section gets to the nitty-gritty. That is, what issues and problems does the reader face? This section also sets the stage for your solution.

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White Paper Design: Preventing Copy Overload

Just as lively copy, creative subheads, and powerful conclusions are important in guiding the reader through a white paper, layout and design play important roles as well.

Because white papers are so copy intensive, a good design incorporates:

- Sidebars
- Callout quotes
- Relevant visuals, such as charts and graphs
- Generous amounts of white space

All of which helps to break up rows and rows of text, making it easier for the reader to work his way through the document.

- **The solution** – Whether it's your company's methodology, software product, or proven best-practice guidelines, this section describes the solution to the problem posed earlier. If possible, include examples from work your company has done (but in a low-key, non-promotional way).
- **The benefits** – What pitfalls are avoided and what rewards are reaped when companies choose your product or service? Provide supporting evidence (and quantifiable benefits, if you have them) for why your solution is the best one.
- **Conclusion** – Perhaps because white papers are longer than most collateral pieces, many of them lose steam at their most crucial point: the conclusion. So, develop a quick summary that emphasizes both the benefits of your solution as well as the risks the reader would take if he should decide not to use your product or service. And keep it short and to the point; 300 words or fewer is best.
- **Call to action** – Finally, tell the reader what you want him to do (Contact your company? Visit your site?), and then tell him how to do it.

Of course, depending on the subject, these sections can be rearranged or merged. In some cases, additional sections might be needed.

Final Tips

A few final tips: first, be creative with subheads. Why call the introduction "The Introduction" (which can make any reader's eyes glaze over) when you can come up with a subhead that is more interesting, clever, or playful?

Second, break content into digestible chunks, using shorter paragraphs, sidebars, and bullets, when possible.

Third, don't overlook layout and design; both play important roles in guiding readers through a white paper. But avoid the temptation to "overdesign." A white paper that is too slick or glossy will look more like a sales brochure and less like an objective, informative document.

White papers don't have to be boring. With the right format, the right tone, and the right approach, you can entice your audience to read a white paper from beginning to end—and get them one step closer to buying in to your solution. Or purchasing your product or service.

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