The White Paper

White Paper

Introduction: Selling Complex Products and Services

It's pretty easy to sell something simple. Want to sell ice cream cones? Just put a picture of an ice cream cone where a lot of people can see it on a hot day, stick on an arrow pointing toward your door, and brace yourself for a steady stream of business. People know what an ice cream cone is, can anticipate the enjoyment they'll get from it, and know how to buy one. Even when they have to choose among flavors and various mix-ins, most can manage to figure it out pretty easily.

You can almost say the same thing for selling red convertible sports cars. Stick a picture of the car and an open road in front of an appropriate audience and they'll get the message. They know what it is, they anticipate the enjoyment they'll get from it, and they understand how to buy one. You may have to do some explaining when it comes to the price and the financing options, but the buyer understands what's going on.

Selling complex products—a piece of industrial equipment, computer hardware or software, telecommunications equipment, medical devices, advanced technology of any sort, or the sophisticated services that go along with such a product—is another matter altogether. The people who make—or at least approve—the final decisions and who sign the checks don't work with the complex product. They don't know the advantages or how those advantages translate into benefits for them and the organization. The people who benefit the most may actually have the least say in the decision. Often, the people who evaluate the product, who are supposed to implement it once it has been acquired, and who will use it day in and day out don't fully understand the product either. They are usually ill prepared to explain benefits to the people who approve the purchase and sign the checks.

And the lack of understanding about complex products goes even further. Your own sales force, channel partners, and strategic allies often don't fully understand your product and have difficulty communicating your key messages in a consistent way.

Making matters worse, the executives who bless these decisions don't really want to buy your product or any product at all. Unlike an ice cream cone or a sports car, there is no anticipation of immediate pleasure or benefit from the purchase of most complex products. Put another way: nobody with the authority to sign a purchase order will walk out the door feeling that if he or she just buys your GFX 72-9550, Model C70 Series, they'll be the coolest dude on the street.

In the end, there is an understanding gap, sometimes obvious and sometimes hidden but there just the same. People buy complex products when they understand what the products will do for them, how the products fit into whatever else they are doing, where the value lies, and how to evaluate and configure the right purchase. When they don't understand, the sales process sputters and stalls.

Closing the Understanding Gap: The White Paper

To close the understanding gap, marketers of complex products increasingly turn to white papers. A white paper is a communications tool used to explain something about your complex product or service to a particular audience. It might involve analyzing the return on an investment in your product for the CEO or explaining the product at considerable depth to the technical people doing a detailed evaluation. Whatever the particular obstacle and audience, the white paper provides the explanation necessary to enable the evaluator or buyer to move on to the next step in the purchase cycle.

The white paper is just one of many weapons from the communications arsenal for marketers of complex products. It works in conjunction with ads and brochures and product/data sheets, which provide less detailed information. Together they make a powerful one-two punch: the ads, brochures, and data sheets generate initial interest and the white paper follows up with more detail. Sales and reviewer's guides, corporate backgrounders, analyst briefing books, and other documents are specialized versions of the basic white paper. In all cases, the white paper closes the understanding gap by addressing the need of a particular audience for more information about your product.

White papers are especially effective when aimed at specific problems. If prospects aren't buying your product because they don't understand the payoff, you can develop a benefits and ROI white paper. If they are worried about how it will work in their environment, you can develop an integration white paper. If the sheer number of configuration possibilities seems confusing, then develop a configuration white paper. Where there is intense competition, a competitive positioning white paper differentiates you from the pack. When people don't even realize that they have a need, the white paper can fill in the picture for them. Whatever the obstacle, a white paper can be developed to address it.

Often, however, a company wants the white paper simply to be about the product—everything we've always wanted to tell you about our product. In this case, we still try to frame the discussion in terms of larger issues of importance to the audience. Otherwise, the white paper will be regarded as little more than an extended ad.

Benefits of White Papers

The number one benefit of the white paper is that it lets you directly address an issue that is preventing prospects from moving to the next stage in the sales cycle. In addition, it lets you:

Cover a complex topic in depth—Unlike an ad, brochure, or product/data sheet, you can go into a single topic at considerable depth. Complex products suffer when they must be reduced and overly simplified in ways that prevent people from fully understanding the product. A white paper gives you the space that your complex product requires.

Set the agenda, define the playing field—Too often, companies find themselves trying to explain their products in terms that have been set by others, which puts their products at an immediate disadvantage. In a white paper, you set up the presentation and discussion to showcase your product to its best advantage.

Advance the sales cycle —As noted above, sometimes the prospect can't move forward until certain issues are resolved. The white paper lets you address those issues directly, in depth, and on your terms.

Engage the prospect —White papers can be interactive, directly engaging the prospect on the particular issue. For example, an ROI analysis can provide room for the prospect's own numbers and calculations, a configuration white paper can provide appropriate models that the customer can use as a guide.

Speak appropriately to the target audience —To technical people you want to talk technology, to business managers you want to talk business benefits. In the white paper, you can set the level of discussion to the level of your audience.

Establish authority and credibility —Often buyers need confidence in you as an expert in the field. Instead of just telling them how capable you are the white paper demonstrates your expertise through insightful analysis of a key issue.

Clarify your strategy and positioning —The process of developing a white paper is an effective mechanism to help the organization clearly articulate its strategy and position in regard to key issues. An experienced white paper writer will help the organization synthesize different viewpoints to produce a coherent view that is meaningful to the organization and its target audience.

In all cases, the white paper ensures that a consistent, appropriate, and accurate message gets out. Whether the message is being delivered by a direct sales force scrambling to keep up with frequent new releases, channel partners who are distracted by other products they must also carry, or strategic allies you can't control, the white paper provides your complete story. It is the playbook that everybody on your team can follow.

The White Paper and the Sales Cycle

Unlike the purchase of an ice cream cone, the purchase of a complex product usually requires a protracted sales cycle. The sales cycle begins with the initial review and proceeds through a more detailed evaluation, pricing and financing negotiations, service and support discussions, trials, customization discussions, and finally, a sale.

In the accompanying table, we have identified a few of the typical white papers and where they fit in the sales cycle. Most of the white paper action, as you would expect, focuses on the earlier stages.

Type of White Paper	Function	Stage In the Sales Cycle
Thought Leader	Establish the organization or product as a leader Define the playing field, set the agenda, specify decision criteria. Establish the credibility and authority of the organization.	Early
Business Benefits	Establish the reasons why the organization needs this product	Early
Position Paper	Clarify the organization's position on an issue relevant to the purchase, such as a standard or regulation.	Early
Corporate or Strategy Backgrounder	Position the company and define its strategy.	Early
Evaluator's Guide	Provide a thorough explanation of features, functions, and differentiation.	Early Technical review
Technical Backgrounder	Offer an in-depth discussion of technical issues and technologies Involved	Early Technical review
ROI Analysis	Provide a framework for understanding the payback and communicating the value delivered in business terms	Middle During price negotiations
Competitive Analysis	Position product and differentiate from competition	Middle
Configuration Guide	Provide a framework and models for selecting the most appropriate configuration or feature set	Middle
Implementation Guide	Provide a framework and models for understanding and planning the product implementation	Middle Late
Services Guide	Explains accompanying service, support, and training programs	Middle Late

The White Paper and the Business Strategy

White papers become shelfware when you don't have a plan for integrating them into your overall business strategy, marketing campaign, and sales cycle. The objective is to get the white paper into the hands of audience where it can do its job. Here are some approaches organizations take to incorporate white papers into their business strategies:

Advertising—Thought Leader, ROI Analysis, and Competitive Analysis white papers make effective advertising fulfillment pieces in a strategy to attract qualified prospects.

Direct sales force—An effective way to educate the sales force and give them the ammunition to respond when a prospect poses one of those difficult questions that demand a complete and coherent response.

Other sales channels—A means to ensure that sales partners you may not control and most likely do not give your product their undivided attention have a complete, authoritative, and consistent message at their fingertips, allowing them to effectively handle challenging questions.

Strategic partners—Similar to other sales channels. These people have their own agenda, which will not coincide exactly with yours. The white paper, at the least, puts your agenda in front of them in a compelling way.

Service and support—Increasingly, service and support personnel get involved in the early stages of the sale, instead of after the sale is concluded. They too need to understand the key issues and be equipped to respond to the concerns of prospects.

Employees—In customer-focused organizations, every employee is a potential sales person. They need to understand your products and be able to get the right answers for customers and prospects.

Corporate stakeholders— Regulators, the community, the press, industry analysts, stockholders and investors need to understand your complex product and the issues surrounding it so they can better play their parts.

We find that white papers have substantial pass-through value. A technical person, for example, may not have much interest in the business benefits of the product, but having a business benefits white paper at hand helps that person make a business case for the product to those who do care about the business benefits.

The White Paper Process

You don't just dash off a white paper. It is too long and detailed and too important to be written in a sudden burst of inspiration. We prefer a more methodical 7-step approach:

1. **Problem analysis, problem definition**—Identify the issues that are hindering the sales process. Where there are multiple issues, you need to isolate them and address each independently or group them in ways that make sense.

2. **Preliminary research**—Uncover the issues as the audience perceives them.

3. **Strategy**—Formulate your objectives; determine the concept, theme, style and tone; and define the depth and scope.

4. **Detailed research**—Fill in the details through interviews with technical experts, business managers, sales and support staff, and even customers themselves as well as through background research and secondary source research.

5. **Content development**—Write and design the white paper.

6. **Production**—Prepare for both paper-based and/or electronic publishing.

7. **Distribution**—Release through all appropriate channels described above.

The question always arises: should you develop the white paper in-house or use outside resources? The in-house option, at first glance, looks attractive. The product managers know the product and the market. The technical people have a detailed grasp of the technical issues. You can leverage your technical writers, who are already working on the various documentation. Or, your marketing communications people can write it while they develop press, advertising, and collateral materials.

These in-house resources, in practice, aren't readily available. Our experience has repeatedly shown that in-house white papers rarely get done on time and often never get completed at all. Product managers can't take the hours away from their primary responsibilities. Your technical people were hired to engineer, not to write. Your technical writers and marketing communications writers have their hands full with their regular duties. (We know because we are often called at the last minute—just weeks before a critical trade show or product introduction—to take over a white paper project from the over-extended in-house team).

But there is an even more important reason to bring in an outside writer on the white paper—the outside writer approaches the white paper from the critical perspective of the reader, your prospective customer. The outside writer sees your product or service as the reader does and explains the material in ways that resonate better and are more credible. An experienced outside writer brings this critical fresh perspective that your people cannot provide, seeing the issue the way your prospects see it and explaining your position or solution to them so they understand it. And it is exactly this understanding that makes your white paper effective.

In addition, an experienced outside resource will almost always do a much better job, deliver it faster, and at a cost that is less than the true cost of in-house people.

Frequently Asked Questions

Question	Answer
How long does it take to develop a white paper?	4-10 weeks for content and design. Then you need to plan for time produce the document, especially if you intend to print it. The big wildcard in the timing is the review process--how long it takes your people to review and respond to drafts.
How much does it cost?	The cost varies based on the length, technical complexity, research required, art and design requirements, and lead time. In general, for basic content and design only, costs range from $7,500-$10,000 on the low end to $30,000 or more at the high end. (Plus whatever production costs are incurred.)
Is it worth the expense?	In relation to what the white paper does, even the most expensive white paper is a bargain. What is it worth to close sales that you might otherwise lose? Our customers consider white papers cheap given the job they do.
How can we reduce costs?	Keep it simple. Keep it focused on one issue. Manage the review/revision process. Resist changing messages mid process. Avoid rush situations. Avoid last minute changes. Scale back lavish production.
How long should it be?	It should be long enough to communicate what you need to say and no longer. Small

	white papers typically run 4-8 pages. Rarely do white papers exceed 20-24 pages.
How much should we spend on design and production?	White papers don't require lavish design and production. The design and production should be appropriate for the content and should communicate your corporate image and message.
How do we handle negative issues?	You need to address your audience's concerns directly and honestly. You needn't dwell on the negative, but if it is on your audience's mind, you must confront it and resolve it to the audience's satisfaction. The white paper, it turns out, is an ideal vehicle for handling difficult issues.

Put the White Paper into your Arsenal

White papers are very powerful communications tools, but they aren't magic. They can't replace your advertising and press relations initiatives. While they can greatly assist your sales force, they don't replace strong sales management. While they can be invaluable in synthesizing and clarifying strategies and positions, they cannot compensate for misguided strategies and poorly executed business plans. While they can explain the technical complexity of your product in a meaningful way, they cannot mask (for long) inferior design, engineering, and technology.

What a good white paper does is address the issues of understanding and communication—the understanding gap—that prevent prospects from buying your complex product and hinder your sales force, channel partners, and strategic allies in their efforts to sell the product. When an understanding gap arises, you need to use the white paper. It is the stealth weapon in your marketing communications arsenal.

As a fulltime independent writer/researcher/analyst specializing in business and technology, I work with companies on a wide range of projects, from white papers to newsletters to ROI guides. You are welcome to visit my Web site, www.technologywriter.com, to see samples of my work, including various white papers. While you are there, you may also want to check out my ***Ultimate Guides***:

> ***The Ultimate ROI Guide***—how to communicate value

> ***The Ultimate Reviewer's Guide*** --how to influence those who are evaluating or reviewing your product or service

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