

7 STEPS TO A WINNING WHITE PAPER

▶ CONTENT IS KING.

And white papers are the king of content. For many B2B communicators, white papers have long been a staple in the marketing repertoire. But with the increased attention (and spending) on content marketing, more and more marketers are looking to white papers as a content linchpin.

It's no wonder, really. White papers are a natural medium for providing consumers with an abundance of information — straightforward, factual information without overhyped marketing language and sales pitches. Plus, there's no predetermined format you must follow. They come in all shapes and sizes, so you can tailor the document to meet your needs.

White papers also can be a great asset in other forms of content marketing. You can easily repurpose sections as blog entries, microsites and social media posts.

The troubles, of course, are the same as the benefits: White papers are large, undefined and in-depth. So, where do you start?

Easy. Start here.

1 DEFINE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE.

Writing without knowing for whom you're writing is a waste of time and money. And no, you don't necessarily need to do an expensive survey or deep analysis (though if you have the resources, it certainly can help). The whole point of this exercise is to make sure your content aligns with your goals.

Consider this example. If you're selling a piece of software that's specific to doctor's offices, you might want to consider two key decision-making audiences: physician stakeholders/owners and office managers. Your content then needs to speak to these individuals and their pain points.

What if these two segments have different concerns? Do you need different white papers to address those concerns? Quite possibly.

For a white paper, your target audience will typically be the people who make the decisions to buy your product — and the people who influence those people.

▶ Make a few notes below about your target audience:

What industries/types of companies am I selling to?

Who are the decision makers in these companies? (Titles? C-Level?)

What level of education do they have? How experienced are they?

What problem do they have that I'm trying to solve?

How knowledgeable are they about this type of solution?

How knowledgeable are they about my specific product?

How much baseline background information do I need to provide?



2 ANALYZE YOUR SALES CYCLE AND FUNNEL.

While you might not link to your e-commerce site from your white paper, the white paper serves a marketing/sales function. In general, you're trying to move a prospect through the sales funnel. So, it's important to determine where in the sales cycle your target audience is.

For example, if you noted above that your target audience has likely never heard of your solution to their problem, then you have a lot of work to do to move them through the sales funnel. An educational piece about the big-picture solution might not even mention your product.

Let's say you're trying to get high school educators to use your online grade book. If you know they have already bought into the concept of the online grade book, you can focus on educating them on how your product is different than others. But if they've never heard of an online grade book, you have to start by convincing them to give up their pen and paper grade book. And you'll need to target those individuals higher up in the sales funnel.

Does this mean you might need more than one white paper per product/solution you sell?

Yes.

Depending on where they are in the sales funnel, prospects will seek out different kinds of information. And if you aren't providing the information they need at that moment, they will most certainly find someone who is (your competition).

3 ESTABLISH AN EDUCATIONAL GOAL.

Before you write a word, it's also important to make sure you know *why* you're writing a white paper. White papers might be part of an overall content marketing strategy. Or if your organization doesn't have a content strategy, per se, you might include white papers in your sales and marketing plan. Regardless of how you're classifying these documents, you need to know why you're creating them.

But here's the good news. The goal should always be to educate and inform your target audience.

That's right. The first goal of your white paper is NOT to sell. In fact, at the end of your white paper, you likely won't even have a "Buy Now" link.

The goal of a marketing *program* or *campaign* might be to sell more widgets. But an individual white paper is not a direct marketing tool. It's a piece of educational content that fits into the rest of your campaign.

While you're certainly free to write 50 pages if you want to, you're more likely to be successful with something that's more easily digestible — say, eight to 12 pages. And that means narrowing your focus and your goal.

If you're trying to educate prospects about a new product, consider what it is you want to teach them. A few examples:

- How Widget X works
- How Widget X is different from similar widgets on the market
- How Widget X can solve a particular problem

► **Write your educational goal(s) on the lines below.**

GOAL: To inform my target audience about ...



4 DETERMINE YOUR APPROACH AND CONTENT.

► **Outline what you want to say. Begin by determining an approach. Some examples:**

- Backgrounder/overview (Ex: How Content Marketing Is Changing the Way We Sell)
- Describe a solution to a problem (Ex: Using White Papers to Help Sell Complex Products)
- Provide additional details/how-to (Ex: 7 Steps to Creating the Perfect White Paper)

What approach works best with my objective?

What is a working title for my white paper?

What are five keys things I want to cover?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

5 GATHER YOUR SOURCES.

A white paper is only as good as the data and analysis you include. And for most companies, the person writing the white paper is NOT an authority on the product/solution. If you're hiring a writer, you'll need to make sure you work with the writer to identify key sources.

► **Here are a few places to start:**

What are the well-known third-party organizations in my field?

Who are my top three in-house subject matter experts (SMEs)?

Are there other industry experts I should consult?

What about clients?

Is there any research/data available on my topic? (If I don't know, where should I start looking?)

Once you have identified your resources, it's time to schedule phone calls or in-person meetings for interviews, and to dig deeper into your online research.





6 DETERMINE VISUALS.

Even readers who want a lot of content don't want all of it to be words. Once you've done your research and spoken with your experts, you now have an even better idea of the information you want to communicate to your prospects. Which tidbits might be best communicated visually?

► **Make a note of the following visual options you want to include:**

Photos: _____

Illustrations: _____

Infographics: _____

Pie charts: _____

Line graphs: _____

Bar charts: _____

Maps: _____

Other data: _____

Pull quotes: _____

Bulleted lists for sidebars: _____

7 WRITE.

That's right. The actual writing process is one of your last steps. Using everything you've put together above, it's time to crank out a first draft. And if you are smart about your upfront planning, it will be easier than you think.

Target about eight pages to start (roughly 350 to 400 words per page). Don't forget to edit (or hire an editor), and be sure to allow your sources (and any key internal stakeholders) the opportunity to review. Once you're happy with the copy, it's time to let your graphic designer do his or her job. After a final proofread, post the piece to your website and incorporate it into your marketing automation system.

GET GOING

Over time, you'll discover that some white papers are more effective than others.

Be sure to track your results so that you can determine what works best for your organization. What percentage of prospects who read your white paper take the next step? Which topics/titles get the most downloads? How often do customers mention your white paper as part of a decision to buy?

By focusing on providing useful information (rather than on selling), you're off to a great start. Good luck!

