

The Benefits of White Papers

Let's start with a definition. Skip to the next section if you already get what a white paper is.

White papers are formal documents that describe the features and benefits of a product or technology. White papers were originally used in the British parliamentary system to describe some aspect of government policy, or a potential law that is under debate. Businesses have realized they can use the white paper format to create highly effective marketing and sales tools. Nowadays, you see them everywhere, but how would it benefit you to commission a white paper?

White papers help you build credibility with your clients, frame the discussion about your product or technology in a way that benefits you, and build your clients goodwill towards your company or product. In addition, white papers meet your potential customer's need to be in the know by providing information that they can easily consume. You can easily re-use your white paper throughout your marketing campaign. This makes white papers a win-win for you and your customers.

The PhD Effect

White papers help build credibility. The web site, brochures, and emails that a customer has seen all bear the scarlet S of Spin because they are obviously created by marketing folks who want the product in question to *sell*. However, white papers, even those

commissioned and produced by a marketing department, do not bear the scarlet S much or at all. There is something about the white paper format that projects a sense of impartiality, of cool intellectual discourse unsullied by the need to actually sell the product.

My personal theory about this involves the fact that most white papers, even if they do include some graphics and other modern concessions to readability, look a lot like the articles you would find in academic journals. For college-educated readers, this automatically associates white papers with documents written by people smarter than them, or at least people with more letters after their name. This mental association lends credibility and seriousness to white papers. White papers tend to be written with a formal, or a journalistic tone. This also strengthens the reader's association between the white paper they are reading and smart people with letters after their name.

This credibility-by-association is a subtle framing move that makes white papers into powerful marketing tools.

The credibility building work of white papers has two components. First, a company that lets you download white papers describing its products looks more credible simply because those white papers exist. Modern folks largely view the world through a scientific materialist lens, which means that the things that are measurable through scientific means are what is real. So when comparing two products, the one that has white papers written about it is viewed as the more credible product because it has been *studied by experts*.



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Second, if Widgetco commissions a white paper on their Widgetizer product, you can bet that white paper will paint the Widgetizer in a positive light. Very likely, the white paper will tone down the marketing-speak by using formal language and quotes from experts, but in the end, the white paper will show that Widgetco's Widgetizer is the best product for a particular scenario. Because the white paper format has the credibility-by-association effect described in the previous paragraph, it can be *more convincing* than Widgetco's web site, brochures, or other marketing tools. So Widgetco's credibility gets a boost not only because someone thought their products were important enough to write white papers about, but also because those white papers say the Widgetizer is the best product in its category.

Of course, if Widgetco has a savvy marketing team, they know they can't just say anything in a white paper and expect readers to believe it. It has to be framed appropriately, and it must not strain credulity. An artfully written white paper will avoid those pitfalls while building credibility for Widgetco and its products.

Control The Frame, Own The Market

The Word Lions are very skilled at helping our clients [frame their message](#) to their best advantage. One of the most powerful tools for framing the discussion is a great white paper.

The general expectation for white papers is that they will be longer than the typical datasheet, and they will include relevant background information. This means that white papers have greater latitude to work on framing the discussion around the product in question. Web copy, brochures, and email marketing campaigns need to be relatively concise to effectively engage readers. White papers should be fluff-free, but they do provide more room to develop a nuanced argument. They can also include background information like quotes from experts, charts, and information about the challenges that the product in question solves. Taken together, these white paper characteristics give you more room to influence your readers with your preferred framing.

Unless your product is the only one in its niche, you must work on framing the discussion about your product. If you don't frame the discussion, your competitor will do it for you. And they will do it to their advantage!

The Give-Get

Some white papers have a more how-to approach. These white papers tend to downplay or eliminate the marketing language, and focus instead on how the use the product in question to solve a certain problem, or accomplish a particular goal. These white papers are basically product documentation, but they are packaged separately as a white paper, and they address a specific scenario rather than general product usage. For



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example, Widgetco might create a how-to white paper that describes how their Widgetizer product can be used to solve a specific production problem that widget makers are facing.

The benefit that these white papers provide is based on, well, guilt. To the customer (or potential customer), they represent something of value and the company in question provides these white papers for free. So in a very subtle way, the potential customer owes the company something in exchange for this information. They don't automatically owe them their business, but the company will get a bit of time and consideration. A chance to make their pitch.

If all the companies in your niche are providing free how-to white papers, then providing these simply puts you at parity with your competitors. However, if you are the first to provide free how-to white papers, or if yours are better than your competitors, then you will subtly tell your customers that they owe you something--i.e. their future time and consideration--because you have given them something for free.

This is the exact same principle used by sales people when they buy a meal for a potential customer, or take the customer on a trip. If this is the only marketing tactic you are using, then you're in trouble. But in combination with a good marketing strategy, a set of great how-to white papers can provide recurring benefits for a one-time investment.

In addition to being available on your website, your sales team can use white papers as a leave-behind. Quotes from the white paper can support arguments made on your website. Free white papers can help drive traffic to your web site. You can Twitter about your new white papers, reference them in blog posts, and include a link to them in your email signature. These recurring benefits all add value to your investment in a white paper.

Designed To Be Informative

Since before recorded history, human beings have had a need to be in the know. These days, it's almost a compulsion. This is especially true for technically-minded folks who have been charged with researching and evaluating competing products. These folks want to see all the angles, and know all the facts about the products they are evaluating. Screwing up a technology investment is expensive and embarrassing!

White papers are great for these people because the white paper format is designed to be informative. It includes more context and background information than the simple feature lists and "It's great because" statements usually found on web sites. White papers often describe, in some detail, how the product in question solves certain challenges and why it does so better than the competition. White papers do the thinking for your potential customers. By walking them through scenarios that match their challenges, and by showing them how your product solves their challenges



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or makes their life better, a well-written white paper guides potential customers towards the conclusion that yes!, your product is the right choice.

Re-Purposable Content

White papers can be re-purposed. This means that after you have invested in a set of white papers, the content in those papers can often be sliced up and re-used in a different context or worked into other marketing collateral. This allows you to get more out of your marketing dollars.

Search Engine Optimization

White papers are most frequently made available as PDF or Microsoft Word files. Most major search engines, including Google, have no problem indexing these files. This means that white papers can help your web site's search engine rank by contributing relevant, keyword-rich content to your site.

Think about the times you've done a Google search for information on a product. Don't you happily click through to a search result labeled **[PDF]**, knowing that it will be more than SEO-optimized marketing-speak? Using PDFs and Word Documents actually gives you a fair amount of control over how your white paper appears in search results. All of this adds up to a search optimization benefit for the organization that uses white papers as a marketing tactic. Check this document for

more tips on optimizing your PDFs for searchability: http://www.evisionsem.com/documents/optimizing_PDFs-2008.pdf

Portability

Although mobile devices are changing how people in Europe and the USA read web content, there continues to be a perceptual difference between content on a web page and content in a PDF or Microsoft Word file. Generally, white papers are distributed in either PDF or Word format, and they are downloaded rather than viewed online. This contributes to a perception that the content in the white paper is more important. It can also encourage readers to print the white paper and give it a more serious look.

In an environment where attention is a precious resource, white papers can be a very effective way to get your potential customer's attention.

Conclusion


Take a moment to think back over the marketing materials you've seen for a particular product, say a software product. All the web copy, graphics, charts, graphs, brochures, and emails you've seen on the product. Then, think about any white papers you've seen for that product.



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The other marketing collateral probably emphasizes color, graphics, short length copy, and features and benefits lists. The white papers are distinctly different than all the other marketing collateral. And that is a Good Thing.

The white paper helps you build credibility for your company and product. Because the white paper format reminds readers of things written by Very Smart People, it can be a highly persuasive way to talk about your product. With a typical length of five to 15 pages, a white paper gives you room to frame and position your product for maximum advantage. By creating free how-to white papers for potential customers, you build goodwill and assure them you stand behind your product. In addition, you help potential customers make the mental leap from product feature lists to picturing how they can use your product to solve real problems.



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