

The White Paper White Paper

How to Produce A Successful White Paper, And Why

By Alan Radding and Larry Marion,
Triangle Publishing Services Co. Inc.

Selling complex products – a piece of industrial equipment, computer hardware or software, telecommunications equipment, medical devices, advanced technology of any sort, or the services that go along with such a product – takes more than a "shoeshine and a smile," to use Willy Loman's favorite expression.

The individuals who make – or at least approve – the final purchase decisions and who sign the checks often are not the primary users of the complex product. The authorizers typically do not understand the product's advantages or how those advantages translate into benefits for their organization. Ironically, the individuals who benefit the most may actually have little say in the decision.

In fact, the individuals assigned to evaluate, implement and use the product day in and day out usually don't fully understand the product either. Frequently they are ill-prepared to explain benefits to the people who approve the purchase and sign the checks.

And the lack of understanding about complex products doesn't stop there. Your own sales force, channel partners, and strategic allies may not fully understand your product. And if they don't understand it, they can't effectively communicate your key messages in a consistent way.

How to bridge these gaps? 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 something, the sales process sputters and stalls.

Close the Understanding Gap

To close the understanding gap, marketers of complex products use white papers, case studies, online return on investment (ROI) calculators and other marketing tools. A white paper is a printed or online document that describes a product or technology, how it is used, the benefits that accrue to the buyers and the overall impact of the technology or product on an organization.

The specific content and structure of a white paper varies, based on the type of product or service being described, the intended audience and other factors. Some white papers focus on an analysis of the ROI potential of the product. Or they explain the product's technology at considerable depth for the technical people doing a detailed evaluation.

The white paper contents follows the old maxim – form follows function. The format of the white paper should be tailored to meet the intended goals and audience of the white paper. And the key goal of a white paper is to provide prospective buyers with the explanation necessary to enable them to move 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 case studies, advertising, brochures online ROI calculators and product/data sheets, which provide less detailed information. Together these tools provide a comprehensive approach to the marketing and selling of a product. The advertising and other collateral first generates initial interest, while the white paper follows up with more detail. 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.

Vendors should be cautioned against wanting a white paper to just talk about the wonders of their product, in excruciating detail. A much more successful strategy is 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.
- Gain credibility from third parties** – Triangle white papers include comments from recognized experts at leading consulting firms. Their input in the white paper gives it a credibility that helps convert prospects into buyers.
- 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 an online version for the prospect to provide its own numbers and calculations, a configuration guide can provide realistic models that the customer can use.

☑ **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.

☑ **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. Triangle will help you synthesize different internal 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 play book 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	Sales Cycle Stage Appropriate
Thought Leadership	Establishes an organization or product as a leader, defines the playing field and key decision criteria	Early review
Business benefits	Why prospects need the product or technology	Early review
Competitive analysis	Clarify one product within a technology marketplace; opportunity to differentiate	Early review
Position paper	Establish an organization's view on a key standard, regulation or other externally driven condition	Early review
Corporate overview	Position a new company or a new strategy	Early review
Evaluator's guide	Thorough explanation of features and functions for a technical evaluation	Mid cycle review
ROI Analysis	Framework for evaluating the return on investment, including ranges of benefits	Mid cycle review

How to Sponsor A White Paper

Understand that the most effective white papers are those that have the voice and authority of recognized third parties. Creating a white paper internally is usually a time consuming, frustrating and ultimately less satisfying approach. You and your colleagues are paid by the shareholders to create, sell and maintain hardware or software, not to write, design and print a white paper.

Also, a properly briefed outsider brings critical perspective to the content, which is the true source of the paper's credibility. We approach the issue as if we were the prospects, speaking to them and their interests in a voice that is not the company's but more like the prospect's own.

The first step in crafting a white paper is understanding the goals and then articulating the white paper's mission. Triangle's methodology for this process is called the issue plan. After extensive discussions with the sponsor, and research to determine what has already been prepared for this market, Triangle will submit a document that contains the following elements:

- Description of the goals
- Description of the target audience
- Summary of the white paper topics
- Questions to be answered
- Art elements to be developed (charts, text tables, illustrations, etc.)
- Sources – which experts, customers and sponsor officials will be contacted
- Timetable
- Copy flow – who is responsible for what

Following the Triangle methodology will assure delivery of the best product with the least aggravation, and at the lowest possible cost.

The White Paper and Your Business Strategy

Once the white paper has been completed, there must be a distribution strategy. White papers become shelf ware 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 the audience where it can do its job. Here are some approaches organizations take to incorporate white papers into their business strategies:

- Reward for responding to 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 have a complete, authoritative, and consistent message at their fingertips, allowing them to effectively handle challenging questions.

☑ **Strategic partners** – A means to ensure that strategic partners have a complete, authoritative, and consistent message at their fingertips, allowing them to effectively handle challenging questions.

☑ **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 channels** – Stakeholders of all sorts (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. White papers are a crucial part of your web site.

☑ **Other web sites** – Distributing the white paper via Bitpipe will deliver the messages to 21.7 million web site visitors of the leading trade and business publications.

We find that white papers have substantial pass-along 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.

For more information about how to develop a successful white paper, contact Larry Marion of Triangle Publishing Services Co. Inc. 617-244-0698, or lm Marion@triangle-publishing.com