



5 Ruinous White Paper Assumptions

By Tedd Campbell

Take a moment and consider how much a typical business deal is worth to your company: A thousand dollars? Ten thousand dollars? A hundred thousand? More? Much more?!?

Whatever the dollar figure, that's how much you're kissing good-bye every time a potential buyer grows frustrated with your white paper and bounces back to Google in search of a better information source. (Thank you for coming...don't let our logo hit you in the butt on the way out!)

You had your chance and you blew it. But why? What went wrong with the white paper?

Believe it or not, the problem might be you! Okay, maybe not you, per se, but some of your basic assumptions about white papers.

To help you sort this out, I've compiled a list of five ruinous assumptions about white papers that I regularly encounter (and try to correct). Any one of these assumptions can lead to an ineffective, mediocre white paper that fails to engage prospective buyers.

Here's the list, in no particular order:

1. White paper = Academic paper + Logo

White papers and academic papers might look similar, but they actually have very little in common. White papers are soft-sell marketing documents that target either business leaders or the hands-on technical people who influence their purchasing decisions.

Academic papers are written by and for an elite cadre of subject matter experts, and reveal the kind of IP that most companies desperately try to keep secret.

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Unlike white papers, academic papers are not meant to be accessible to non-specialists, which means they're useless for nurturing typical sales leads through the buying process.

If you're offering an academic or quasi-academic paper in lieu of a white paper, don't expect to engage prospective buyers.

2. White papers are best written by SMEs

There are three obvious problems with having subject matter experts (SMEs) write any marketing and sales collateral, white papers included.

First, expert scientists, engineers, accountants, etc are not expert copywriters.

Second, subject matter experts are too close to the material. Their long experience and depth of understanding makes it difficult for them to selectively communicate information to readers who have little or no relevant technical expertise.

Third, the opportunity cost is ridiculously high. Think about it: In the time it takes your (highly paid) star engineer to struggle through an outline and several drafts of a white paper, how much valuable, highly specialized design work could she have done? And after all that effort, will your engineer deliver an effective marketing document? Probably not, and your company will end up paying a premium for amateurish work.

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Without a doubt, your internal subject matter experts are an essential part of the white paper development process—as information sources and reviewers. But if they try to fill the shoes of other specialists—writers, copy editors, graphic designers, etc—they’re unlikely to produce a white paper that will truly impress skeptical B2B buyers, who routinely consume content that’s been professionally written, designed, and edited.

3. White paper writer = Technical writer

A writer specializing in white papers is actually a copywriter who occupies a specific niche in the (technology) marketing ecosystem.

Unlike technical manuals, white papers are meant to be informative and persuasive, which makes them more akin to essays or articles than instruction sets. Some technical writers undoubtedly write fine white papers, but in doing so, they cross over from technical communications into marketing territory, which requires a different skill set.

All labels aside, whoever writes your white paper should make it readable and engaging for the intended audience. If your paper reads like a technical manual, it won’t hold the attention of busy, impatient buyers.

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4. A white paper is a one-person project

One person can certainly put together a white paper...but a good one? Not likely. Check out this list of typical white paper “ingredients”:

- Research
- Writing
- Graphic design
- Copyediting
- SEO keywords
- Marketing review
- Subject matter review
- Project management

Even if you’re a white paper superhero with all the requisite skills, experience, and talent—not to mention the time—you still need to recruit at least two other people to review your work from a marketing and subject matter perspective. No

matter how you slice it, white paper marketing is definitely a team sport.

5. Our target audience is...everyone!

No one can be all things to all people, and neither can a white paper. An effective white paper is intended for a very specific set of readers.

For example, a white paper for business execs probably won't appeal to technical specialists, because they have a different perspective and they're looking for different information. Similarly, a software technology white paper targeted at manufacturing executives is probably not appropriate for software executives, even if a company sells the same technology to both groups. Software executives (obviously) know more about software than their manufacturing counterparts, so they require a different narrative.

Unless a white paper has been crafted for a specific target audience, it will be more likely to repel than attract busy buyers, who can't waste time on unfocused content that's not 100% relevant.

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Want to learn about planning, developing, distributing, and promoting high-quality white papers that connect with skeptical B2B buyers? If so, check out our Special Report on white paper marketing, “Playing the White Paper Game? Here's What You Can Do To Win”.



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