



Bridging the Credibility Gap

Why White Papers Engage B2B Buyers

By Tedd Campbell

What Buyers See

B2B buyers extensively research their purchases *online* before contacting vendors to learn more. They simply type some keywords into a search engine and then click through the list of results.

When buyers find your company, they don't see what you see. They don't see your wondrous technology at work. They don't see your excellent process or your phenomenal support staff. Likewise, your crackerjack sales team, vaunted technical wizards, hyperactive product evangelist—all of your 800-pound gorillas—are invisible to them. *Buyers only see what's on your website.*

Is your website merely a glorified sales brochure? Or does it feature substantial content that showcases your expertise and thus establishes your credibility?

This white paper explains why offering substantial online content like white papers is an effective way of attracting and engaging skeptical B2B buyers.





Why You Need to Share Information

In the past, companies gained a competitive advantage by hoarding information and forcing B2B buyers to engage their sales team early on. The salespeople would keep buyers on a need-to-know basis, carefully regulating the flow of information to maintain the upper hand in sales negotiations. However, with the rise of the Internet, the tables have turned and a new paradigm has emerged.

Thanks to improved search technology, a whole world of information is now only a few keystrokes away. As a result, buyers expect to find the information they need online, and they judge companies on how forthcoming they are with that information. Quite simply, if B2B buyers can't find what they're looking for on your website, they'll bounce back to Google and click on another search result—probably your competitor's.

“Rest assured, buyers will find the information they need.
The only question is: Will they get it from you?”

Like it or not, websites are now the focal point of sales and marketing for most B2B vendors. To attract prospective buyers to your site, you have to provide content that not only shows up in search results but also engages visitors when they land on your page.

Above all, your content has to be *credible*. Modern B2B buyers are immersed in marketing messages from the time they wake up to the sound of their favorite radio station until they check their e-mail one last time before going to bed. As a rule, they're intolerant of unsubstantiated marketing claims because:

- a. They have access to online customer reviews and third-party evaluations that deliver unvarnished opinions and information.
- b. They're under a lot of pressure to perform. Competition is fierce, the stakes are high, and they can't afford to make mistakes.
- c. They've been burned before when substance took a backseat to hype.

If you want to keep their impatient, skeptical eyeballs fixed on your content, you need to offer valuable, relevant information in a variety of formats that appeal to both decision makers and the people who influence them. Although online media is constantly evolving, a number of dominant formats have emerged, including:

- Web pages
- Blogs
- Articles
- Newsletters
- Podcasts

Recommended Reading

Get Content. Get Customers.
by J. Pulizzi and N. Barrett.

If you want to learn how to market with content, read this book. In it, the authors define content marketing as “the art of understanding exactly what your customers need to know and delivering it to them in a relevant and compelling way.”¹ In the foreword, Paul Gillin defines the goal of content marketing as “getting customers to invite you to interact with them. It's about creating relationships that transcend transactions.”² Both of these definitions strongly apply to white papers.

- Webinars
- Videos
- Datasheets
- Case studies
- White papers

Out of all these formats, white papers are the most effective at delivering in-depth analyses of complicated topics—a must-have for B2B buyers who want to make informed purchases.

What’s a White Paper Anyway?

That depends on who you talk to. Like the now-ubiquitous blog, which can be anything you care to post on your website—a semi-literate rant, a professionally produced article, or even a promotional video—the term “white paper” is becoming synonymous with any document distributed in PDF format. Since every document can be published as a PDF file, a more precise definition is needed to truly understand the potential of this powerful marketing tool.

A typical white paper can be defined as *a soft-sell marketing document that describes a solution to a specific problem, presumably one that prospective customers are struggling with.*

Unlike ads and brochures, which appeal to the emotions, white papers appeal to the intellect. Their currency is *credibility*. For this reason, a well-researched white paper, engagingly written in plain language, can still have a powerful impact on people who are awash in marketing messages, as most everyone is nowadays.

But to be effective, a white paper must take a double-barrelled approach: It must *inform* and *persuade*.

Inform with relevant content

Put yourself in your customers’ shoes and give them valuable information they can use immediately. As Aaron Goldman says in his book *Everything I Know about Marketing I Learned from Google*, “In order to become relevant, you must show people how you can help them solve a problem or make a decision.”³

Persuade by not selling

Most of us like buying, but nobody likes to be sold to. Effective white papers are persuasive because they don’t focus on a sales pitch. Instead, their arguments center on a specific issue and are supported by thorough research, real-world experience, and sound reasoning.

By offering white papers that contain valuable insights into pressing problems, you can help your customers, promote your expertise, and, hopefully, land more often on buyers’ short lists.



Ben Franklin's White Paper

Although the modern white paper is a product of the Information Age, this type of marketing document is nothing new, and it certainly predates the PDF format. Consider this excerpt from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, where he describes how he marketed one of his most famous and enduring inventions:

In order of time, I should have mentioned before, that having, in 1742, invented an open stove for the better warming of rooms, and at the same time saving fuel, as the fresh air admitted was warmed in entering, I made a present of the model to Mr. Robert Grace, one of my early friends, who, having an iron-furnace, found the casting of the plates for these stoves a profitable thing, as they were growing in demand.

To promote that demand, I wrote and published a pamphlet, entitled "An Account of the new-invented Pennsylvania Fireplaces; wherein their Construction and Manner of Operation is particularly explained; their Advantages above every other Method of warming Rooms demonstrated; and all Objections that have been raised against the Use of them answered and obviated," etc.

This pamphlet had a good effect.⁴

Why Not Write a Blog Instead of a White Paper?

Technically speaking, you can post anything you want on a blog. You can post *War and Peace*—but very few people will read it. Why?

Two reasons:

1. It's too long.
2. It's not what busy readers are looking for when they click on 'Blog'.

The same arguments apply to extended, in-depth discussions of any complicated topic.

Blogs are Web pages. And readers prefer short Web pages with small chunks of information that are easy to skim through. Not surprisingly, then, effective Web copy has shorter sentences and easier words.

Like a sound bite that merely scratches the surface of an important issue, a blog can only highlight the key points of a much more comprehensive white paper. (For this very reason, blogs are terrific at drawing attention to your white papers and thus boosting readership.)

A 400-word blog entry should complement a white paper—not try to replace it.

Decision Makers Read White Papers

65% of technology decision makers reported using white papers to gather information as part of their job, according to a 2010 survey by UBM TechWeb.⁵

Another strike against blogs is that they have no “thud” factor. You can’t pull a blog out of your briefcase and slap it down on a conference table. Nobody passes out blog entries at a tradeshow. Online, a blog is just another Web page that’s freely available; nothing distinguishes it as a high-value product. It’s not a distinct, portable item that must be explicitly downloaded, perhaps after a registration process. A blog just doesn’t have that kind of weight—and it’s not meant to. That’s not what the blog “brand” is all about.

When B2B buyers purchase expensive, complex products and services, they frequently rely on white papers for in-depth discussion and relevant insights because, at present, no other format conveys substantial (but very specific) reference information so effectively and so economically.

Consider the options:

- **Blogs and articles** are too short and too lightweight to provide in-depth coverage.
- **Brochures**, either in print or online (i.e., Web pages), are a fluffy concoction of basic information and emotional appeals—the brand, the sales pitch.
- **Case studies** are success stories that include limited, high-level information.
- **Datasheets** contain detailed product specifications for expert technical readers. They are not meant to educate, explain, or advise.
- **Slide decks** persuasively communicate basic concepts and essential arguments.
- **Videos** are excellent for dynamic content like product demonstrations and customer testimonials, but audience attention wavers when talking heads serve up minute after minute of detailed technical information.
- **Webinars** can teach concepts and present limited amounts of information, but they are poor reference sources for someone who wants to go back and check their facts. Also, participants have no way of knowing if a session is worthwhile without attending it. Post-event viewers can jump to different points in the video, but that’s analogous to flipping through pages and stopping at random to read a few lines.

Of course, each of these formats can play an important role in a B2B content marketing strategy. They’re powerful tools in the hands of skilled marketers who understand their respective strengths and weaknesses. As the expression goes, you need the right tool for the job.

When the job is to present B2B buyers with a comprehensive, persuasive discussion of a specific topic, the right tool is a white paper.



Conclusion—From a Buyer’s Perspective

Like practically everyone else on the planet, you buy things every day. Most purchases are small, so you probably don’t think about them very much. You can afford to make snap judgments because there are no consequences if you make a bad decision. They’re low risk.

Big-ticket items are a different story. Expensive, complex products or services have the potential to affect your quality of life or, in the case of B2B purchases, the fortunes of your company, so you need to be more cautious. To offset the increased risk, you try to learn everything you can about a given problem and then you research the various solutions on offer. You’re always looking for sources of credible information.

Can a vendor’s traditional brochure website be a source of credible information? No, because it doesn’t feature meaningful content that you can use. However, you might be able to find a vendor website that has an online resource centre filled with informative white papers and other relevant material.

If you do find a vendor website with substantial content, you’ll probably draw at least three conclusions (consciously or not):

1. The vendor has an expert team. They’ve anticipated your questions and are ready with answers.
2. The vendor is on your wavelength. They understand that you need information to make your big decision and are making every effort to help you.
3. The vendor is successful. They have the resources to develop and deploy useful information, which sets them apart from their competitors.

In other words, by offering substantial content, the vendor has bridged the credibility gap and pre-sold you on their products or services. You’re engaged.

That’s the power of white papers.

Important Questions to Ask Yourself

Before you add white papers to your marketing toolbox, ask yourself these questions:

- How** do buyers know that we’re experts in our field?
- Why** should buyers think that we understand where they’re coming from?
- Where** do buyers find answers to their questions?
- When** do buyers contact us? (i.e., Where are they in the sales funnel?)
- Who** are buyers contacting, if not us? Why?
- What** tools do we have for reaching out to buyers?

Review your answers. Are you bridging the credibility gap? Are you engaging buyers?

If not, contact us at cgap@cworthy.biz to learn more about our white paper services.

Viral Marketing

In a 2009 Eccolo Media survey, 89% of readers claimed to pass white papers on to others and 32% said they shared them with 3 or more people, making white papers the most viral type of marketing collateral.⁶

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