

Creating White Papers that Drive Sales

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White papers can be extremely useful sales tools for IT solution sales people, serving as education and decision-support materials for customers. However, too often, white papers are developed in a corporate marketing vacuum--disconnected from real-world sales contexts--and inadvertently, they address topics that neither sales people nor prospective buyers find useful.

How does this happen? Before developing a solution and creating marketing messages, companies usually conduct a market analysis to identify customer needs and "wants." And based on this information, marketing teams develop ideas for white papers. While some papers may hit the mark, others fall short because they simply do not play a strategic role in the sales process. They might contain loads of information from very knowledgeable people--but not the specific information that helps move key stakeholders along in the sales process.

The source of the problem is lack of sales insight--experience-based knowledge about what real customers are thinking, doing, and asking during the sales process. Market analyses typically cannot help identify all the necessary granularities in messaging or fully anticipate where sales people will run into roadblocks. These insights are often discovered only when sales people start talking with real

customers--and you can use these insights to create white papers that drive sales.

Understand the Sales Process

So how can you ensure that your next white paper is a powerful, targeted sales tool? First, take time to understand the complexities of the sales process for your particular offering. Complicated, solution-oriented IT sales usually demand that sales people "sell" to various stakeholders within a company--not just one person. Some stakeholders, such as CIOs and line-of-business VPs, have budgetary power, while others champion the solution internally in order to be associated with a successful or high profile project. Still others influence key decision makers, including IT managers who evaluate technology options and make recommendations, and purchasing agents who compare prices and recommend the "vendor of choice."

To close deals, sales people must establish value in the minds of all stakeholders at just the right points in the sales process. White papers can play a critical role in communicating this value--particularly during intermediate sales stages, when customers are considering their options and evaluating technologies. However, different stakeholders measure value in different ways--and hence, white paper topics, approaches, and information must be tailored accordingly.

For example, financial stakeholders (e.g., CXOs with discretionary budgets to spend) are usually responsible for achieving quantifiable business objectives, such as sustaining competitive advantage, reducing costs, and increasing business efficiency. They usually want to know how your solution fits into their overall strategy and vision, and they seek proof that its features and benefits will help them achieve important, long-term "wants" and goals. In contrast, technical evaluators want detailed information about the solutions' features, functionalities, and architecture because they are concerned about issues such as technical integration, security, and scalability. At the

same time, other influential stakeholders may not grasp that there is a problem to solve in the first place—they need to understand the latent pain, or business problem, that your solution solves before they can comprehend its value.

While mapping messages to audiences is usually a straightforward process, the challenge here is communicating with each of these purchasers and influencers in a unique way, with tailored value propositions and information appropriate to their responsibilities, concerns, and wants.

Develop a Sales-Driven Strategy

Given the complexities of the sales process, start by talking with your sales force to better understand which types of stakeholders would value a white paper, why, and what must be communicated in order to accelerate the sales process. In many cases, you may need to develop more than one white paper to adequately equip your sales force. Key questions to ask include the following:

- Who is the suggested audience for this paper?
- Is this a key stakeholder during the sales process, and if so, what role does this stakeholder play during a typical sales process? (Purchaser/decision-maker? Influencer?)
- What sales challenge would this white paper help you address? Why is a white paper the best sales tool in this case?
- At what point in the sales process do you anticipate using this paper, and what level or type of information is appropriate at this point?
- Ideally, what do you want the stakeholder to think, feel, and do after reading this paper?

Narrow Your Focus

You also may need to narrow the focus of your white paper to address the stakeholder's most

important hot buttons or “wants.” The key to narrowing your focus is to understand how your particular audience defines and measures value. Together with product development and sales, consider questions such as: What is this stakeholder's greatest concern or want? What does the stakeholder seek in a solution? How would the proposed solution address the stakeholder's greatest concern?

Some of the most common wants or hot buttons of key stakeholders include the following:

- Scalability, availability, and reliability
- Resistance to obsolescence (i.e., future proof)
- Security
- Performance
- Cost effectiveness
- Rapid (and long-term) ROI
- Ease of use, implementation and administration
- Interoperability

Choose the Right Content Strategy

After narrowing the focus of your paper, carefully consider the best type of white paper to accomplish your goals and appeal to the stakeholder. Each type of white paper educates your reader in a specific way, so the choice is important.

Some of the most common “technical” white paper types include the following:

- Technology briefings, which explain new or underlying technologies, or detail an architecture
- Buyer's guides, which may include a criteria list or a worksheet to assist customers during the evaluation process
- Planning and implementation guides, which help customers plan for future industry or technology trends, or prepare for an implementation
- Application guides, which explain how customers can apply a technology to solve different technical problems

- Case studies or example applications, which examine the success or failure of particular approaches, options, or technologies

Some of the most common “business” white paper types include the following:

- Business implication discussions, which describe how technology decisions affect financial, operational, or other business issues
- Strategy discussions, which explain how technology investments should be viewed as part of a business-IT strategy
- Industry trend overviews, which analyze market, operational, or technical trends
- Issues analyses, which discuss key industry issues and offer recommendations on ways to respond in terms of strategy, technology investments, etc.
- Application guides, which explain how customers can apply a technology to solve general or industry-specific business problems

In some cases, selecting a single white paper type is most suitable. In other cases, combining white paper types into a single document may be appropriate.

Execute Well

Even with a sales-driven plan, a white paper is doomed to failure if your writer lacks the exceptional writing skills, technical savvy, and marketing experience that these documents require, as well as the ability to select and synthesize meaningful information from a variety of sources. That’s why many companies often hire short-term contractors who specialize in white paper development. A dedicated professional—particularly one who understands complex solution selling processes—can devote full-time resources to your project so that it’s completed quickly and efficiently, as well as offer fresh insights and experience to ensure the success of your white paper.

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