

DEMYSTIFYING WHITE PAPERS

HOW TO GET BETTER CONTENT
AND GENERATE MORE LEADS



Today's marketing takes place online.

Whether you're an emerging startup, a stable small business, or a large multinational with a wide range of products, market segments, and audiences, digital marketing allows you to reach your customers and build relationships in ways that were previously unimaginable.

One of the most effective tools in the digital marketing tool chest is content marketing. Defined by HubSpot as *"the process of planning, creating, distributing, sharing, and publishing content to reach your target audience"*,¹ content marketing has quickly become the go-to strategy for successful organizations. In fact, a 2020 survey found that 70 percent of marketers are actively investing in content, and 24 percent plan to increase their investment in 2021.²

But it's not just marketers who care about content. Business-to-business (B2B) buyers rely on it as well. FocusVision showed that the average buyer consumes 13 pieces of content throughout the buying process.³

Content marketing can take the form of videos, blog posts, infographics, webinars, podcasts, and much more. Each format has its own strengths and weaknesses, and each plays a unique role depending on where the customer is in the journey.

This white paper will look at a specific type of content: **white papers**.

That's right, it's a white paper about white papers! Funny right? But we wanted to explore this topic in more detail so that you can get a better understanding of what white papers are, how they can be used, and why organizations often fall short of their white paper goals.

Throughout, we'll include examples of how to make your paper more interesting and effective. We'll try to clear up some of the most common questions we hear from companies and help you avoid the pitfalls and challenges that lead to unsuccessful campaigns.

Done well, white papers are valuable lead generation and thought-leadership tools that are used by companies and brands to help their potential clients, customers and buyers to research and compare solutions. They are the foundation that ties the rest of your marketing activities together by allowing you to capture information, nurture prospects, and close more sales. They act as the basis for future webinars, presentations, keynote speeches, and executive articles. The potential to spinoff more content from them is nearly endless.

So, sit back, fill up your cup with your beverage of choice, and join us for an in-depth look at one of content marketing's most interesting and underrated tactics.



¹ <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/content-marketing>

² <https://www.hubspot.com/state-of-marketing>

³ <https://www.focusvision.com/resources/content-really-is-king-content-consumption-in-the-b2b-buyers-journey/>

WHITE PAPER? WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WHITE PAPER?

The term “white paper” has been around for a long time. As a result, there are a lot of definitions and a lot of preconceived ideas of what a white paper is and should be.

In engineering or high-tech industries, for example, white papers can often be long, technical documents that are aimed at other technical audiences. In the pharmaceutical industry, white papers are scientific and rigorous documents aimed at other scientists. In government, white papers are used to present policies and review legislation.

In marketing, however, white papers are aimed at your buyers. They are designed to be interesting, educational, and valuable to a potential customer. In general, they are around 2500-3500 words and mix in design elements such as callouts, graphics, and other visuals. Below, you’ll see an example of how a callout or quote can break up text and make the document easier to read.

This is an example of a callout. By adding design elements like this, you can reinforce key stats, quotes, or messages and make the white paper more visually appealing.

For a more specific definition, let’s return to HubSpot. They define a white paper as “a persuasive, authoritative, in-depth report on a specific topic that presents a problem and provides a solution.”⁴

There’s a lot there, so let’s break it down piece by piece.

⁴ <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/what-is-a-whitepaper-examples-for-business>

PERSUASIVE, AUTHORITATIVE, IN-DEPTH

White papers are educational and informative. They are not product documents, and they are not the place to make a pitch or talk about your specific solutions. Instead, you want to educate your audience and show that you understand their challenges, their fears, and their goals. And you want them to come away feeling like you have the expertise and experience to help.

To do this, consider white papers as more than just a long blog post. They should be well-researched and include supporting information or stats from respected sources. They should also try to take a position or answer questions that are relevant and interesting to your target audience.

SPECIFIC TOPIC

White papers that try to be all things to all audiences end up as a jumbled mess of ideas and concepts that don’t fit together. Instead, focus on a specific topic and explore it in detail. This also helps to focus your research, explain your position, and provide value to the reader.

PROVIDES A SOLUTION

Finally, the reader should come away feeling like they learned something. Give your reader a path forward so they are confident about what to do next.

While many companies are hesitant about sharing too much about their products or solutions, the truth is that no one will become experts at what you do just by reading a paper. But when your audience sees that you know what you’re talking about, they’re far more likely to put your company on the short list when they’re ready to buy.

WHO SHOULD USE WHITE PAPERS?

White papers are great tools, but they aren't suited to everyone. For example, most people (in this case, consumers) won't read a white paper just to decide which type of soft drink to buy. But if we look at the companies and suppliers behind that soft drink, the executive at the soft drink manufacturer may read a white paper about a new flavour technology or a new factory automation solution that can help improve efficiency and reduce costs.

B2B companies with complex, innovative, or technical ideas and solutions tend to benefit from the level of depth that a white paper provides. They're also useful for organizations that sell products or services that have long sales cycles that require multiple decision-makers and a significant budget.

A 2021 survey found that 42 percent of B2B buyers viewed white papers as the most valuable content when researching a purchase, second only to research surveys and reports.⁵ The same survey found that 57 percent prefer white papers early in the buying process, compared to just 10 percent in the late stage when they are comparing solutions directly.

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This table summarizes this section and serves as an example of how papers can mix text with graphics to make the document easier to read.

WHAT A WHITEPAPER IS

- Educational, informative, and in-depth
- Focused on a specific topic or idea
- Interesting and easy to read
- Used by buyers for research and information gathering
- An important part of your lead generation strategy

WHAT A WHITEPAPER IS NOT

- Product focused and salesy
- High level, fluffy, poorly researched
- A boring wall of complex text and jargon
- Late-stage, decision-making content
- Something to post on the website and never think of again

⁵ <https://www.demandgenreport.com/resources/research/2021-content-preferences-survey-buying-committees-look-for-visual-research-influencer-backed-content-experiences-that-tell-a-valuable-story/>

THE 5 COMMON MISTAKES COMPANIES MAKE WITH WHITE PAPERS

Once published, white papers can typically be used for 18-24 months. Most can be updated or refreshed with new statistics and information to further extend their life.

However, just writing a paper doesn't mean you'll achieve any results. Writing the white paper is only the first step in the process. Failing to see the whole white paper project through to a campaign results in lost time, money, and effort that could have been used on other strategic initiatives.

In this section, we'll introduce the five most common white paper pitfalls that lead to disappointing results and show how you can avoid making the same mistakes.

PITFALL 1 No Strategic Alignment

White papers are tactical. Writing one for the sake of it is not strategic, and it's not going to result in a positive return.

A 2021 Content Marketing Institute (CMI) report found that 51 percent of B2B marketers who had low levels of success said it was because of strategic issues.⁶

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Without clear strategic alignment, both with the marketing strategy and the larger objectives of the organization, it's far more difficult to choose a topic, adopt a position, and demonstrate value. It's also more difficult to justify the time and budget required to do a good job since there's no strategic imperative for doing so.

In the end, white papers that start without a purpose often end delayed, unfocused, or unfinished as other work takes priority.

⁶ <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2020/09/b2b-industry-benchmarks-budgets-trends-research/>

SOLUTION 1 Clearly Define the Purpose of Your Paper

Before doing anything else, take a step back and understand why you want a white paper. What role will it play in your marketing? How does it fit with your strategy? Who will read it, and what should they learn?

If you're launching a new product, entering a new market, or feel that your brilliance has been flying under the radar, a white paper may help to establish your voice and show your new audience that you're good at what you do. They can be aimed at a specific vertical or segment alongside other efforts from your team to provide useful information, generate leads, and keep the sales pipeline full.

By taking a strategic approach and incorporating the paper into a larger campaign, you'll be better positioned to use it going forward.

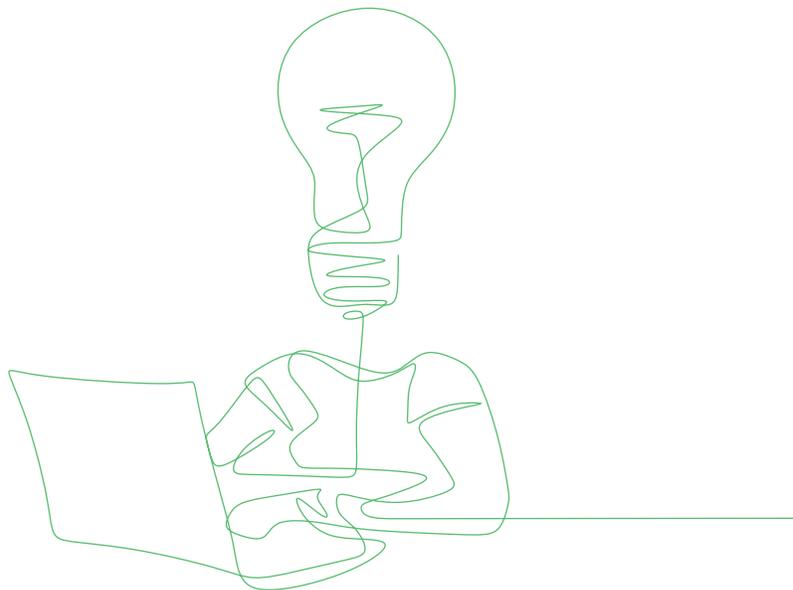
PITFALL 2

Lack of Focus

Think back to the initial definition of a white paper – it must be about a specific topic.

While there is no such thing as a bad idea, not every good idea needs to end up in the paper. Good ideas forced into the document take the focus off the main point and distract the reader from the key takeaway. Similarly, new ideas that come up late in the process or after the drafts have already been approved can lead to delays and rework.

A lack of focus on your white paper topic risks leaving the reader more confused than when they started – not great if you're trying to be seen as a thought-leader.



SOLUTION 2

Be Specific and Know Your Audience

A 2020 survey found that 83 percent of the top-performing B2B marketers said that the value their content provided was the top factor contributing to their success.⁷

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To provide this value, you need to define your audience. CMI found that 77 percent of the most successful B2B marketers use personas, compared to only 36 percent of the least successful.⁸

If you have multiple markets, segments, or types of customers, focus your paper on one specific group. You can release more than one white paper to cover each specific group. By grounding your paper in the needs of your reader you can decide what fits and what should be left out. This also helps to take away some of the doubt or hesitation around what to talk about, because you already know what's important to your audience.

Even better, you don't have to throw good ideas away! Keep track of them and see if they're better suited to other formats, such as a blog post or article, video, webinar, or social media post. Your white paper team and writer will guide you during the brainstorming and discovery phase so that you can choose the best story.

⁷ <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2020/09/b2b-industry-benchmarks-budgets-trends-research/>

⁸ https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2019_B2B_Research_Final.pdf



PITFALL 3

Delays, Missed Deadlines, and Stalled Projects

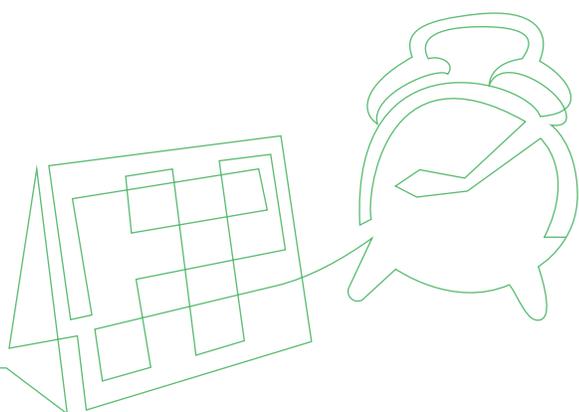
Because white papers are longer and more in-depth than the average blog post, they take more time to write and require more input and feedback at each stage.

There are also far more opportunities for disruptions and delays that weaken the paper ensure accuracy and compliance.

A recent survey found that 32 percent of marketers think their content creation workflow is fair or poor.

A recent survey found that 32 percent of marketers think their content creation workflow is fair or poor.⁹ Without a well-defined process, white papers get held up in review or otherwise stalled, leading to frustration and waning enthusiasm internally.

If the goal is to generate leads, a delay in the launch makes it impossible to start reaching your audience. In some cases, a delay may even allow competitors to move in and stake a claim on a topic before you do.



SOLUTION 3

Trust the Process and Commit to the Timeline

Like any large project, setting key milestones, performance indicators, and schedules will help keep people moving.

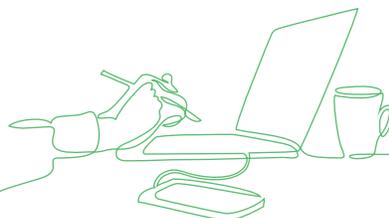
Defining the process in advance sets expectations for everyone and makes it clear how delays or setbacks impact other parts of the campaign.

On the next page is a sample process that shows just how many steps, and weeks, are required to go from the initial idea to the final paper. For highly technical, proprietary, or regulated topics, additional reviews may be needed to ensure accuracy and compliance.

⁹ <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2018-b2b-research-final.pdf>

SUCCESSFUL WHITE PAPER TIMELINE

MILESTONES	OWNER	TIME
Initial discovery calls with key subject matter experts (SMEs)	Writer, SMEs	1 week
Draft outline with key sections, supporting statistics, and general messaging	Writer	1 week
Approval or edits to outline	Review Team	1 week
First draft of paper	Writer	2 week
Review, suggestions, and edits to draft	Review Team	1 week
Second draft, near final version	Writer	1 week
Final edits, minor tweaks, and wording suggestions	Review Team	1 week
Final copy delivered	Writer	<1 week
Initial Design and Layout	Graphic Designer	1 week
Design edits and feedback	Review Team	1 week
Second draft, near final design	Graphic Designer	1 week
Final edits, minor design tweaks	Review Team	1 week
Final document delivered	Graphic Designer	<1 week
Total time		12 - 14 weeks



PITFALL 4 Lack of Ownership and Defined Roles

As the schedule above shows, white papers require collaboration between the writer, the marketing team, the subject matter experts, the graphic designer, and anyone else involved for review and approval.

Most importantly, it depends on early and continuous buy-in from the project owners and the executive or leader who will lead the development of the paper. Often, these roles are not clearly defined, or key team members will be hesitant to put themselves and their brand out there.

Being hesitant is understandable, especially if it's one of the first times a company is taking on this type of project. But this hesitation can disrupt the process and cause delays to a project that had otherwise been moving along well.

Finally, another common challenge is that too many people get involved only in the review stage. This “*review by committee*” approach lets everyone have their say, but it can lead to delays and rework while compromising the key messages.

If there's still hesitation, take a deep breath, trust the process and your team, and put yourself out there knowing that you're good at what you do and that you can add value to your readers by sharing your expertise.

SOLUTION 4 Clearly Define Roles From the Start

Consider who needs to be involved at each step and what role they'll play from the beginning. For example, it may make sense to bring in technical experts, salespeople, executives, and even customers during the discovery calls so that they can share their unique perspectives and improve the depth of the paper.

Once the paper is written, you may not need everyone to review the drafts. Instead, you may decide to appoint a member of the marketing team to provide suggestions and feedback on the writing. If you do need technical feedback or suggestions from other team members, flag the specific parts you want them to look at and ask that they ignore the rest. This not only keeps things moving, but also makes it easier for them to fit the review into their day-to-day workloads.

The owner, or the person who has final approval, should be involved throughout the process so they aren't surprised at what they see at the end and don't reset the project back to the beginning.

If there is still hesitation around publishing the content, step back and see if you've followed the process up until now. Have you aligned the paper with your strategy, chosen a specific topic that's relevant and valuable to your audience, researched supporting information and statistics, and gotten feedback from your team? If so, it's likely that you're in a good position to move forward.

Marketing is a constant process of trying new things and seeing how your audience responds. But you won't be able to know until you do it. So, take a deep breath, trust the process and your team, and put yourself out there knowing that you're good at what you do and that you can add value to your readers by sharing your expertise.

PITFALL 5 Lack of Sustained Promotion

After months of hard work that goes into writing, designing, and publishing the paper, it's surprising that many companies fail to promote it or get it in front of their audience.

Too many companies simply bury it on their website, throw a couple of posts up on social media, and then move on to the next project.

Why? It seems that a lot of companies worry about annoying their audience. They aren't sure if they should share the same thing more than once, or they think that by having it on their site, people will stumble upon it if they are interested.

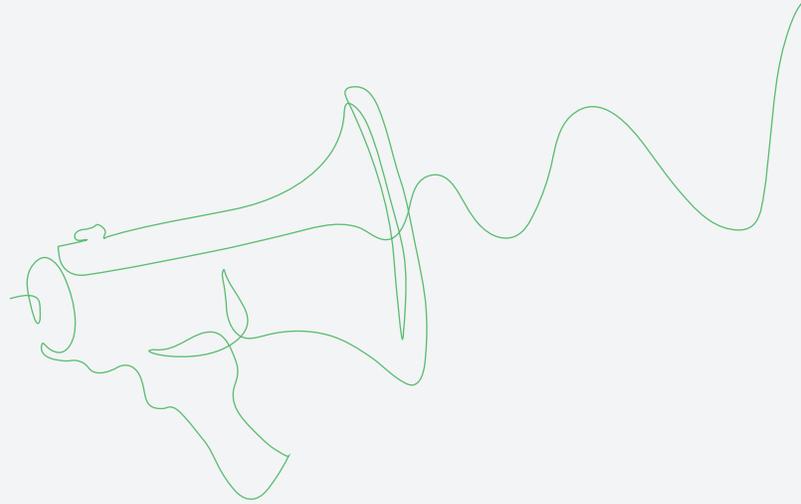
However, it should be clear that failing to promote means spending a lot of time, money, and effort on a piece of content that won't lead to new customers.

SOLUTION 5 Promote, Promote, and Promote Again

Instead of worrying about annoying your audience, you should instead think about the value you can provide them. You're the expert at what you do, and you have information that can help others do their jobs better.

By shifting your perspective, you can see how you're actually doing a disservice to your audience if you don't promote the paper. You're essentially withholding information that would benefit them.

Consider a 2021 survey that found that 62 percent of B2B buyers relied more on content research than they did the previous year.¹⁰ Also consider that 76 percent of buyers are willing to register for and share contact information in exchange for a white paper.¹¹



76 percent of buyers are willing to register for and share contact information in exchange for a whitepaper.

Finally, when you look at your marketing stats, you'll see that only a small percentage of your audience sees your social media posts, opens or clicks through your emails, or visits your website.¹² You can't expect everyone to see your paper the first time when there's so much activity online.

As part of the planning process, think about how you will promote and share the paper. This may mean putting up budget for paid ads and paid promotion of the white paper. What works best will depend on your industry, your readers, and how much you're willing to spend. Known channels such as paid ads, third-party lead generation programs, and email campaigns can all help you reach new prospects.

You can also create other content around the main topic and themes of the paper. Plan to release blog posts, webinars, videos, and anything else you can think of in support of it. These smaller and easy-to-consume formats drive people to download the full paper and let you reuse the content you've already created across multiple formats.

10 <https://www.demandgenreport.com/resources/research/2021-content-preferences-survey-buying-committees-look-for-visual-research-influencer-backed-content-experiences-that-tell-a-valuable-story/>

11 <https://www.demandgenreport.com/resources/research/2021-content-preferences-survey-buying-committees-look-for-visualresearch-influencer-backed-content-experiences-that-tell-a-valuable-story/>

12 <https://blog.hootsuite.com/organic-reach-declining/>

The White Paper is Just the Beginning

Your project isn't over when you publish the white paper. The best companies leverage the ideas and insights from the white paper across their marketing campaigns. Content from the white paper needs to be repurposed to help initiate awareness and sales opportunities as explained in this diagram.

Thought-Leadership

Promoting a new approach or idea

- Webinars, blog posts, podcasts

Establishing industry expertise

- Industry trade publications, guest articles

Growing executive profiles

- Industry panels, keynote speeches, LinkedIn articles

Demonstrating value to customers

- Videos, infographics, social media

Gaining credibility with investors

- Interviews, executive talking points



Sales and Marketing

Reaching new prospects

- Paid ads, SEO, third-party campaigns

Generating leads

- Landing pages, blog posts, webinars

Building contact lists

- Email marketing, direct mail, lead scoring

Identifying top prospects

- Lead nurturing, sales calls, demos

Driving conversations with the sales team

- Training materials, sales playbooks, messaging

TURN WHITE PAPERS INTO VALUABLE MARKETING TOOLS

White papers have the potential to be foundational pieces of content and form the basis of marketing campaigns that build awareness, generate leads, and demonstrate your expertise and experience. They are educational, informative, and well-researched, and they provide value to your reader through their depth and ability to cover important topics in detail.

But as we've shown, writing a white paper for the sake of it will not achieve these results. Successful papers start with a clear strategic objective and provide an answer to a specific question or topic. They follow a defined process with clear milestones and ownership at each stage. And they are promoted and distributed to potential readers across multiple channels, in various formats, and through repeated and consistent messaging over a long period of time.

Companies and executives that want to be thought leaders must ensure that the content they put out reflects their brand, communicates their position on important issues, and plays a role in their larger lead generation efforts. By avoiding the pitfalls explained above and collaborating with a team of white paper experts who have successfully written and deliver quality papers, you'll be well on your way to positioning your organization as a knowledgeable, trusted expert.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bridge the Gap Marketing Solutions and New Initiatives Marketing Inc. have been working together since 2016 on white paper projects for North American B2B companies. During this time, they have developed and refined a successful process that has helped public company executives and private company founders take the first step toward demonstrating thought leadership by explaining, educating, and selling to clients through effective white papers. Industries and topics covered have included: automotive, retail, enterprise communications, food & beverage, data analytics, commercial real estate, long-term care/nursing homes and marketing strategy.

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