

Top 5 White-Paper Development Mistakes

White papers play an important role in moving prospects further along in the sales cycle. Avoid these top development mistakes and you'll be well on your way to delivering an effective sales tool.

When considering a technology investment, the majority of evaluators and decision makers turn to white papers. In fact, KnowledgeStorm and MarketingSherpa report that nearly 3 in 5 technology professionals pass white papers along to colleagues and coworkers. And according to TechTarget, 82% of IT decision makers indicate that they refer to white papers. So how can you effectively deliver these important sales tools? By avoiding these top five mistakes.

Mistake #1: Insufficient planning. Too often, white papers are developed without enough forethought. As a result you end up with a paper that doesn't appeal to prospects or customers, and provides little value to the sales team. Whether you develop the paper in-house or outsource it to a writing professional, proper planning is a critical step. At a minimum, you should document the objectives you hope to achieve, target audience, key theme, and top points to be covered. (For a free white paper planning guide, send an email to info@tentonmarketing.com.)

Mistake #2: No outline – or a weak one. White papers are the business world's equivalent of a term or research paper. And every high school and college student knows that a key step in the process is the creation of an outline. Put serious effort into this stage and you'll be well rewarded. That means capturing more than just key themes – you need to outline the points to be covered in each section – and the more detail, the better. An effective outline serves four main purposes:

1. Ensures you have a firm grasp of the topic
2. Gives you a chance to confirm you have all background information needed to develop the draft
3. Provides an opportunity to get up-front agreement about paper details from all key participants
4. Accelerates development of the first draft

Mistake #3: Lack of objectivity. Certainly, anyone is capable of documenting his or her ideas or following an outline. But that doesn't mean that person is able to develop a draft that is objective in nature, a key requirement for creating a white paper that resonates with your target audience. It's often difficult for company insiders to step outside of their organizational roles and view a business issue or your company's offering from an objective perspective. If your organization is fortunate enough to maintain a dedicated in-house writer, you probably don't need to worry. If that's not the case, you may want to consider hiring a professional writer who will contribute a much-needed level of objectivity.

Mistake #4: Poor project management. If you're developing a white paper with the goal of adding it to your library of resources, an uncertain finish date might not be an issue. But if your paper is needed to support a specific initiative – for example, as a Webinar follow-up or a trade-show giveaway – you have a hard-and-fast deadline to hit. When you assign the white paper to an employee, you're often up against competing priorities and may find that the process gets dragged out indefinitely. Outsourcing the development of your white paper can help you meet your deadlines. If that's not an option, you should create a project plan with milestones and clear due dates. You need to hold all participants – the writer and reviewers – to these dates. And don't forget to account for the time needed to get your paper laid out and printed.

Mistake #5: Lack of thorough review. Oftentimes, people throughout the organization are corralled at the last minute to review a white paper draft. This is a setup for failure. First, if these employees weren't involved in reviewing the outline, they won't apply proper judgment in determining whether or not the paper is meeting its goals. Second, without advance notice to set aside time for review, they either won't provide feedback in a timely manner, or will rush through the review. A rushed review can lead to a weak paper and/or a missed deadline. When reviewers don't spend enough time reviewing the first draft – and instead provide the majority of their feedback during the second review – you're stuck making major changes at a time when you should be focused on fine-tuning the details.

Checklist for White Paper Success	
Have I filled out a planning guide?	
Have I developed a comprehensive outline?	
Have key participants reviewed and approved the outline?	
Is the writer able to be objective?	
Have I developed a project plan with milestones (including time for layout and printing)?	
Have I asked reviewers to set aside time for reviews?	

Hopefully this checklist will help you avoid these common white paper development mistakes. And remember, for a free white paper planning guide, simply send an email to info@tentonmarketing.com.

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