

Getting Through to the Corner Office: How to Make Sure Busy Decision Makers Read Your White Paper

Reaching decision makers in corner offices is more important than ever. Here are two simple ways to make sure time-constrained executives read your white paper.

White papers are the most commonly used media type among IT professionals.

- A Profile of TechTarget's Hyperactive IT Researchers, TechTarget, October 2010

Do you worry that your sales force isn't getting in front of C-level executives? Well you should. In a down economy, it's critical to secure executive-level buy-in for the purchase of technology solutions. The good news is that executives seek out white papers when researching solutions to their company's problems. But you've got to get your point across quickly to this busy audience. That means making your paper as reader-friendly as possible. And there are two simple ways to do that: include an abstract (or executive summary) and design your paper to be easily scanned.

Summarize Your Paper Up-front

You may be resistant to including an abstract or executive summary that sums up the entire paper. Perhaps you think a teaser is more fitting. After all, you spent the effort to develop this paper. You want to make sure it's read – right?

Quickly convey the essence of the paper in a full-blown abstract or executive summary

Here's the problem with that approach – you're focused on yourself and not the reader. If the prospect has the time – and your paper is well written and organized – then he or she just might read your paper from beginning to end. But what about the harried executive who is shuttling between meetings and conference calls and struggling to stay atop emails and voice mails? You don't want to miss the opportunity to get your message across to this important stakeholder.

That's the very purpose of an *executive summary* – to succinctly explain the main points to an executive. By focusing on the salient points, you should be able to convey the essence of the paper in a few paragraphs. If your paper is on the longer side – say, more than 7 pages – the summary might need to be a bit longer. But never make it more than one page. Remember, your reader is a busy person.

Format for "Power Browsing"

Many of us have become adept at managing the messages bombarding us at every turn. After all, we're accustomed to digesting small bites of information as we toggle back and forth between applications and screens. As a result, we have a tendency to scan or skim content – it's how we quickly determine relevance and value.

Present key messages in easy-to-digest nuggets:

- *Headings*
- *Call-outs*
- *Graphics*
- *Bullets*
- *Tables*

A study conducted by University College London and commissioned by the British Library in early 2008 provides insight into our new habits. Notably, the study found that "...there are signs that new forms of 'reading' are emerging as users 'power browse' horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins."¹ While the study focused on online behaviors, it seems fair to say that many of these habits are finding their way into our offline lives.

So if a busy executive does decide to read your paper, it's more likely than not that she'll start by scanning or "power browsing." Here's what you can do to help your reader glean the essence of your paper at a glance:

- Use headings and subheads to succinctly describe the section – and convey the key message.
- Pepper the paper with call-out boxes and quotes that highlight important points.
- Present key messages in bullets or tables.
- Format the paper so that these elements stand out – ideally in a column dedicated to call-outs and sidebars.
- Insert graphics – drawings, charts, or photos – that help illustrate critical points.
- Include comprehensive footnotes for every third-party quote used to add credibility to your argument.

White papers are passed along to colleagues more than any other marketing content

Incent Your Prospect to Take the Next Step

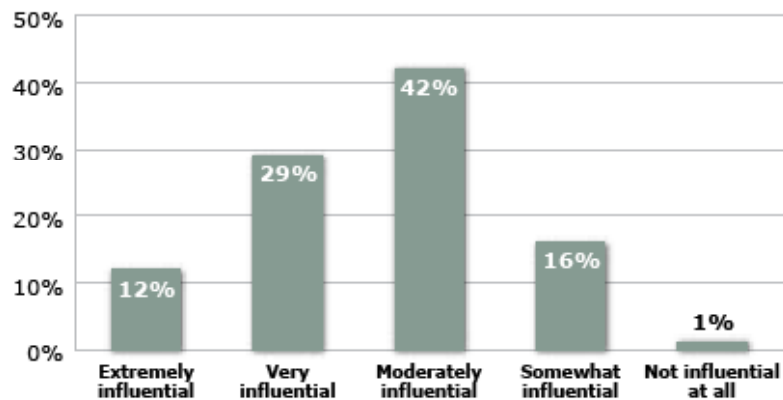
If the reader is sufficiently enticed – and has the time, such as on a long flight – she may read your white paper in depth. At the very least, she'll probably share your paper with someone who works for her. In fact,

¹ *information behaviour of the researcher of the future*, University College London, 11 January 2008

93% of IT buyers pass along up to half of the white papers they read/download.²

And that's good news for you. In a B2B technology collateral study conducted in 2010, the vast majority of respondents felt that a white paper was moderately-to-extremely influential in making the final purchase decision.³

Figure 6. How influential are white papers in your purchasing decisions in 2010?



Source: *Eccolo Media*

So make sure your white paper efforts pay off. Invest the time to write a comprehensive and compelling summary and design the paper for maximum readability. By doing so, you'll make the most of your one chance to engage that busy person in the corner office.

Stephanie Tilton is a content-marketing consultant who helps B2B companies craft content that engages prospects and customers, nurtures leads, and advances the buying cycle. She has produced over 150 white papers, case studies, and eBooks for a range of organizations, including some of the world's leading technology companies. She is the author of the eBook *5 Steps to a White Paper that Pulls in the Perfect Prospect*, and contributed to chapter 10 of *Content Rules* by Ann Handley and C.C.

² *How to Maximize the Use of White Papers In Your B2B Marketing and Sales Process*, TechWeb, February 2009

³ *Eccolo Media 2010 B2B Technology Collateral Survey*, Eccolo Media, September 2010

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To find out how Stephanie can help you educate prospects, promote your thought leadership, and ratchet up the results of lead-generation and nurturing efforts, visit <http://www.tentonmarketing.com> or contact her at stilton@tentonmarketing.com.