Top 5 White Paper Development Mistakes

White papers play an important role in moving prospects further along the buying 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, TechWeb reports that 93% of IT buyers pass along up to half of the white papers they read/download. 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. Ideally, you should conduct research into the issues and topics that matter to your prospects. Document these, along with – at a minimum – the objectives you hope to achieve, target audience, key theme, and top points to be covered.

A lack of planning dooms a white paper from the beginning

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. 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 from all key participants about the points to be covered
4. Accelerates development of the first draft

Put serious effort into this stage and you'll be well rewarded. You need to capture more than just key themes. Outline the points to be covered in each section – the more detail, the better.

Mistake #3: Lack of Objectivity

Anyone is capable of documenting his or her ideas or following an outline. But it 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.

An outside perspective can add a fresh viewpoint to your paper

It's often difficult for company insiders to step outside of their organizational roles and view a business issue 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 part of a product launch, for a Webinar follow-up, or as a trade-show giveaway – you have a hard-and-fast deadline to hit.

Communicate clearly and frequently about due dates and expectations

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. And don't forget to account for the time needed to get your paper laid out and printed. Hold all participants – the writer, reviewers, and designer – to these dates.

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 approving 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 to read the drafts, they either won't provide feedback in a timely manner, or will rush through the review. While delayed feedback can lead to a missed deadline, a rushed review can result in a weak paper.

Lack of awareness about review expectations can further compromise your project. When reviewers rush their review of the first draft – and instead provide the majority of their feedback on the second draft – you're stuck making major changes at a time when you should be focused on fine-tuning the details.

Checklist for White Paper Success
Hopefully this checklist will help you avoid these common white paper development mistakes.

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?	

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