

The White Paper Advantage

by Kirk Richardson

Having been a business-to-business communications professional for more than 30 years, I can tell you there isn't a Swiss Army Knife tool that works for all purposes. It's about communicating with customers and prospects around the world, who operate in different market sectors and represent different cultures.



Whether a potential customer is on the other side of town or the world, they are in need of solutions of some sort. Increasingly, they want to research the possibilities on their own. The problem is that the Internet is flooded with information. How do customers find reliable options in the sea of websites (often online brochures), blog posts, and articles? Who do you trust?

Reliability is important no matter what product or service a customer is researching, but the risk becomes

more intense as the price of a potential project climbs. Careers are often at stake, rising or falling based in a decision. Sometimes, the future of the business is even in jeopardy. Some companies believe that a few well-worded paragraphs on a website or email provide all the assurance that is needed to close the next deal. Others rely on clever ads. But something is missing...

1. An understanding of the problems that they face
2. Thorough research
3. Technical details – from failures past to new findings
4. Verifiable numbers
5. A call to action built on a solid argument
6. Graphics to support content, and well written words to support images
7. Easy to skim, visually appealing documents that can be shared with line workers or executives

Cost is also a factor in the MarCom decision-making process. White papers are not simple to produce. They require time and brainpower. They are exponentially more expensive than an email or blog post. They are also usually less expensive than a glossy brochure or annual report. But white papers cost enough time, money, and effort that some professionals, who know of their existence, opt not to add them to their sales and marketing toolkit.

Those who ignore this communications device, try to get by with:

- Brochures and a good old fashioned sales pitch
- A PowerPoint presentation that forces the prospect to read between the lines
- An email that falls short of the full story and lacks credibility
- A static web site that prospects visit for 30 seconds prior to the next click

An acquaintance of mine, Gordon Graham (thatwhitepaperguy.com), notes that he has written several white papers for an outfit you may have heard of: Google. According to Graham, the company that built the world's premier search engine couldn't find anyone qualified to write its white papers. Maybe this is part of the problem. So few people have the skills to write a really good white paper. It's unlikely that you have the perfect candidate on staff, but if you did, he or she might look like this, with a combination of these capabilities:

- Technical writing or industry-specific business writing background
- Researcher able to access and use primary and secondary sources of information
- Journalist, with top-notch interviewing and writing skills
- Copywriter/marketer/salesman hybrid, who understands the art of persuasion and how to convince an audience to take the next step
- Business operator, who knows the importance of using numbers and quantifying value, from payback to ROI to the bottom line

Many companies simply never get around to writing a white paper. In fact, whole industries have somehow missed incorporating these hybrid communications pieces into their MarCom and sales toolkits. These organizations often settle for a brochure and set of data sheets. But they are missing an opportunity. By leaving the white paper out of the mix, companies and non-profits miss out on the chance to help customers, prospects and others who are searching for answers. These teams, who make the best of their available resources, are often faced with:

1. Relying on other collateral to make a sales pitch
2. Turning off potential customers with me-focused marketing literature
3. Missing the opportunity to help prospects understand a vexing problem... and one or more potential solutions
4. Frustrating prospects by burying a solution in dry data sheets, forcing them to mine for information that they need to find quickly
5. Foregoing a long-lasting sales and marketing tool for a more expensive, shorter shelf-life advertisement or other fleeting opportunity

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There are many ways to squeeze extra value from a white paper, including:

1. Include downloadable copy on your website, and let it work for you 24/7
2. Get your sales and marketing people on the same page with a white paper. Make sure that their stories match!
3. Repurpose parts of your white paper content in articles, presentations, and other forms of communication like newsletter or magazine article copy
4. Use a white paper as a key component of a direct email campaign to contact customers and prospects with new ideas
5. Position your company or organization as a thought leader. White papers can help build your credibility!

The possibilities are endless. Contact us today to discuss your idea for a single white paper or a whole series of influential masterpieces that give you a competitive edge in the marketplace. Set yourself apart from the crowd!

About the Author: *Kirk Richardson has written hundreds of proposals, technical reports, articles, and more than a few white papers in his 30-year career. His many marketing communications pieces have led to millions of dollars in new business. Kirk works on white papers, case histories, magazine articles, annual reports and newsletters for b2b clients who want to connect with former customers, current clients and prospects.*