



Rick Novy Tech and Copywriting, LLC

rick@novytechandcopy.com

+001-480-342-7053

PO Box 14736, Scottsdale, AZ 85267, USA

Problem-Solution White Papers

What They Are and How to Use Them

By Rick Novy

Introduction

In business-to-business transactions, any time a product is technical, novel, or requires a large capital layout, the time for customers to make a purchase decision can be long. In these situations, customers perform due diligence, comparing products from several sources to determine which solution best resolves their specific problem. How does your company position itself to win that contest? The problem-solution white paper can be part of the answer, especially near the top of the sales funnel.

Problem Discussion

Let's look at these situations and explore why customers take so much time to make purchases. Understanding the customer's mindset is key to knowing how to position your company to end up with that sale. This isn't usually end-consumer-driven business, though it can be, so it's critical to influence the right person in the right way.



- **Technical products**

Whether the product under consideration is an integrated circuit or a network router, you have engineers involved in the purchase decision. "Engineers are frustratingly hard to market to. Engineers are impervious to traditional marketing techniques - and they like it that way." [1]

In order to get the attention of an engineer, you must focus on what the engineer wants to see. It isn't hype. It isn't emotional. In fact, the techniques that work with most people can backfire when tried on an engineer.

The engineer is interested in one thing only, and that's the most cost-effective solution to a technical problem, and that isn't necessarily the cheapest solution. The engineer understands a

more expensive product that does not fail is more cost-effective over the long haul. That's why engineers like data sheets and specifications.

Data sheets from several vendors can be put side-by-side and directly compared. If a given product is hands-down better in every category, the engineer's job is easy. As we all know, life is seldom that simple. The analogous product from a number of vendors will have different strengths and weaknesses, and it's up to the engineer to decide which compromise is best.

- **Novel Products**

This is similar to technical products in many ways, but the target influential person may or may not be technical. Insight will be dependent upon the product being offered and the structure of the customer's company.

Just what is meant by a novel product? It's something new, and usually has no competition or it has competition from other companies in the same situation: invisibility. A customer who doesn't know a product exists won't buy it no matter how many companies build it. Often, the customers don't even know they need the product. In other words, most of the market share for the product remains unserved.

In this situation, educating the customer is paramount. Customers must recognize a need before they will consider buying a new product, and that's especially true if they've always "done just fine" without it.

- **Large Capital Expense Products**

Here, we mean products with significant cost. Examples might be an airplane, an automated semiconductor test platform, a new computer network, a spectrometer, or even a new set of golf clubs.

“Emotion-based selling techniques aren’t effective with data-driven analytical types.”

- R. Varadin, Engineer

A major purchase can consume a large percentage of the budget, so it often requires multiple signatures for approval at different levels of management. The influential person must have information for self-education, and needs that same information to present to the boss.

Hard sales techniques are not going to be effective in these situations. Engineers get annoyed with sales pitches and tune them out anyway. Many people are resistant to change, especially

when it involves a novel way of doing things. Management might be inclined to stick with an inferior product just because it is a known quantity.

The Solution

In fact, there is a marketing document designed for exactly these situations. It's called a problem-solution white paper, and you're reading one right now.

This type of white paper is, simply put, a report. The objective is always to sell product, of course, but it does so in a fundamentally different way from most marketing documents. They are usually technical. Some (like this one) are less technical, but still perform the same job. The white paper spotlights a problem and discusses a solution.

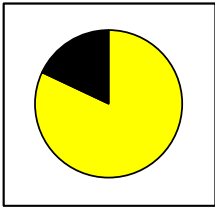
Take a moment to look back at what you have read. We spotlighted a problem, dissected it in three ways, and now we're discussing a solution. It's a pretty simple model, really, but not necessarily easy to write effectively.

The secret to problem-solution white papers? They give the reader credit for intelligence. The person who reads a white paper is looking to gain education in an effort to make an informed and often data-driven decision. It's an opportunity for you to demonstrate a solution that just happens to be consistent with a product you sell. However, this isn't the time to tout a specific product. That task is better handled in a background white paper.

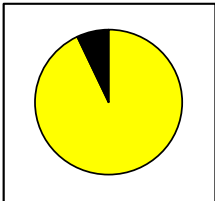
“Engineers respond well to communications that address them as knowledgeable technical professionals in search of solutions to engineering problems.” [5]

- Robert W. Bly, renowned copywriter

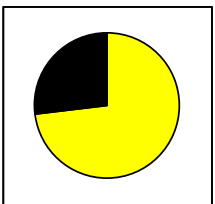
It's a very low-key approach to sales. The pitches are subtle, and in some cases the call to action is never even stated, only implied. But that's okay, because you aren't after an impulse sale. You are trying to score a sale to a deliberate thinker, and white papers in general are very effective in that arena. So just how effective are white papers?



85% of B2B decision-makers and 82% of influencers claim moderate to extreme influence from white papers when making purchase decisions. [2]

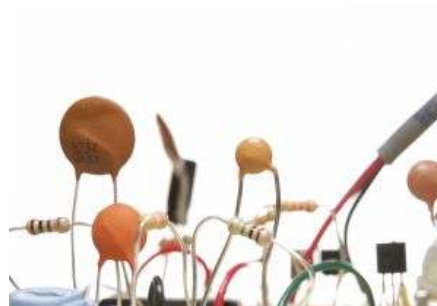


93% of readers pass around as many as half the white papers they receive. [3]



Over 73% use white papers to research possible technology solutions. [4]

What do those statistics tell us? White papers are read, and they are passed around. And, white papers are an important factor in purchase decisions.



What Goes into a Problem-Solution White Paper?

It might surprise you to learn that there isn't really a standard format, and opinions vary on the topic. A lot of white papers are poorly done. Some companies try to use a hard sales approach or blatantly hype their own products. Since you've read this far, you already know why that is a bad idea, and product-specific information belongs in a backgrounder white paper, not a problem-solution white paper. Other companies will pluck an article from a technical journal and simply call it a white paper. The article might be very interesting to an engineer, but it really isn't a white paper at all.

While there is no set format for problem-solution white papers, there are a few components that tend to appear in the vast majority of them. The general format goes something like this: [6]

Problem
Proof of Problem
Additional Problems
Basic Solution
Conclusion

- **Problem**

Here is where you align with the customer who experiences a problem. Your target market is that group of people who experience the problem, or *think they might* experience the problem. You don't mind if other people stop reading here because they aren't going to buy anything from you no matter what the white paper says. They aren't your target demographic.

- **Proof of Problem**

This is where you convince readers who experience the problem that they are not alone. It's also your opportunity to prove to other readers they may indeed be suffering from a problem they weren't even aware of before reading. You pull the reader through in anticipation of an honest-to-goodness solution, and you'll give it to them. However, since they are reading a white paper, they expect the solution to come without a blatant sales pitch.

- **Additional Problems**

This is where you outline secondary problems that can arise from neglecting the main problem, or discuss other problems that may also be solved by using the same solution.

- **Basic Solution**

This is where the meat of the white paper resides. Educate the reader on how to best solve the problem. This section is where you drop subtle hints about your product to the reader, for instance, using your parts as examples of how the solution can be solved. You identify the parts as being yours, but do not hype, hard-sell, or call extra attention to them in any way. White paper readers are smart enough to figure that out on their own.

- **Conclusion**

If you do a direct pitch at all, this is the section to place it in. The conclusion is generally short, not allowing space for more than a sentence or two for a plug. As with any marketing document, there should be a call to action. In the problem-solution white paper, that can often simply be a link to a landing page where the reader can download more information. It's never hard-sell. The target reader for this type of white paper isn't ready to make a purchased decision yet, anyway.

Generating a White Paper

At this stage a problem-solution white paper might seem like a good idea, but the prospect of having it created could seem daunting. In some ways they can indeed be intimidating, and that's because the actual writing is only the surface of the project. Most of the work takes place before the first word is written, and that work comes in the form of research and planning. Fortunately, there is more than one option for creating white papers if you want to use them.



- **Generate Internally**

This is an approach many companies take, and if you happen to have a technically knowledgeable person who is also a skilled writer, it's clearly a viable option. The advantage to generating the document internally is cost-effectiveness. The drawback is that the white paper is likely not the author's highest priority, and target dates can slip or the paper may never be finished.

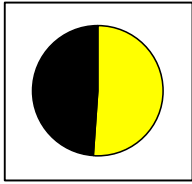
- **Hire a Professional Writer**

This is also an approach many companies take, and if you can find a good writer who also has a technical background, it could be the ideal way to generate white papers for your business. The advantage of this approach is you hire somebody dedicated to writing your document and knows how to put it together. That results in fewer revision cycles and a quicker time to completion. There is a disadvantage, though. Cost. While many variables can affect cost, you can typically expect a white paper to be a mid-four-figure investment.

- **Generate Internally and Hire a Professional Writer to Polish**

This can be a good compromise solution. There are several advantages: The proper technical content is included in the document directly by a subject expert, and the professional writer takes the information and puts it into the correct order. The writer also polishes the grammar and paragraph structure for the best impact. The disadvantage is a possible increase in revision cycles, as well as potential disagreement on how to structure the paper.

Another statistic brings to light the dangers of keeping the document completely internal, especially for companies not fortunate enough to have a professional-quality writer on staff.



51% of those surveyed say writing quality is very important or extremely influential. [7]

Half of potential customers are turned off by poorly-written copy. This strongly implies the cost-savings from generating a white paper internally is more than offset by loss of business that is impossible to quantify. Using the professional writer could very well be a better long-term investment.

Using Problem-Solution White Papers

Once a white paper is in hand, what can you do with it? Here are some ways they can be used, [8] and you can probably come up with several more.

- Make the white paper available on the company website. 87% prefer documents in PDF format.[4]
- Distribute through online white paper directories.
- Bring physical copies to trade shows, customer meetings, and other in-person events.

A note about using white papers on the company website.

There are two philosophies on how to approach this. On one side are the companies who want to distribute the white paper as widely as possible. They make the white paper easily accessible. The other side uses the white paper as bait to collect, on an opt-in basis, an email database to use for distributing newsletters. There are arguments for and against both options.

Conclusion

If your company sells products that are technical, novel, or require a large capital outlay, the problem-solution white paper is a tool that should be evaluated for marketing your product. A well-written white paper builds trust with prospects and elevates your company's expert status. People tend to trust experts, and people tend to buy from those they trust. [9]

For further information on white papers and writing for engineers, visit our website.

www.novytechandcopy.com.

References

- [1] Huff, Dianna, "Market to Engineers: 5 Must-Know Strategies Plus 2 Surprises" [marketingsherpa.com](http://www.marketingsherpa.com/article/how-to/5-mustknow-strategies-plus-2) (8 June, 2005), Retrieved 23 May, 2013 from <http://www.marketingsherpa.com/article/how-to/5-mustknow-strategies-plus-2>
- [2] Tertiary source: Nettles, John Paul, "A Compilation of White Paper Statistics" jpnetttles.com (16 July, 2012), Retrieved 20 May, 2013 from <http://jpnetttles.com/2012/07/16/a-compilation-of-white-paper-statistics/> Secondary Source eMedia Paper "Nine Strategies for B2B's Greatest Lead Generation Content Tool", Primary source: Eccolo Media 2009 B2B Technology Collateral Survey Report.
- [3] Tertiary source: Nettles, John Paul, "A Compilation of White Paper Statistics" jpnetttles.com (16 July, 2012), Retrieved 20 May, 2013 from <http://jpnetttles.com/2012/07/16/a-compilation-of-white-paper-statistics/> Secondary Source eMedia Paper "Nine Strategies for B2B's Greatest Lead Generation Content Tool", Primary source: Information Week 2009Tech Marketing Series "White Papers."
- [4] Secondary source: Nettles, John Paul, "A Compilation of White Paper Statistics" jpnetttles.com (16 July, 2012), Retrieved 20 May, 2013 from <http://jpnetttles.com/2012/07/16/a-compilation-of-white-paper-statistics/> Primary source: Tech Target White Paper "How to Maximize the Use of White Papers in your B2B Marketing and Sales Process".
- [5] Bly, Robert W. "Six Things I Know for Sure About Marketing to Engineers" www.bly.com (n.d.) Free report.
- [6] Mattern, Jennifer "How to Write a White Paper" www.dirjournal.com (1 September, 2009), Retrieved 20 May, 2013 from <http://www.dirjournal.com/business-journal/how-to-write-a-white-paper>.
- [7] Secondary Source: Steizner, Michael, "Major Study Shows White Paper Power Increasing!" [writingwhitepapers.com](http://www.writingwhitepapers.com) (n.d.), Retrieved 20 May, 2013 from <http://www.writingwhitepapers.com/blog/2009/10/29/major-study-shows-white-paper-power-increasing> Primary Source: Unidentified white paper by Eccolo Media (hyperlinked in secondary source but primary source had been removed.)
- [8] Mattern, Jennifer "How to Use White Papers to Market Your Business" www.dirjournal.com (24 April 2012), Retrieved 21 May, 2013 from <http://www.dirjournal.com/business-journal/how-to-use-white-papers-to-market-your-business/>
- [9] Stevens, Mark "People Buy Trust Before They Buy Products" <http://www.destinationcrm.com> (25 February, 2008), Retrieved 24 May, 2013 from <http://www.destinationcrm.com/Articles/Web-Exclusives/Viewpoints/People-Buy-Trust-Before-They-Buy-Products-47321.aspx>

