

Keep the Funnel Flowing: White Papers

About 71 percent of your potential customers abandon your Website without converting to sales.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/understanding-which-website-conversion-rate-to-use-2010-8>

You spend money to capture the attention of potential customers--money you don't want to waste. But if converting casual interest into completed sales were simple, every business would have more customers than it could serve.

Content and Conversion

Although the average cost of customer acquisition varies widely from industry to industry, there's no doubt that most industries invest heavily in marketing content. And yet

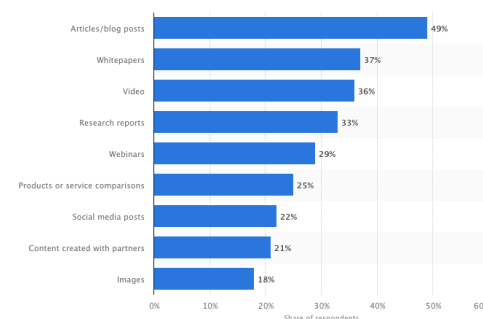
Only 6 percent of B2B marketers...rate their content marketing strategy as "highly effective," according to the Content Marketing Institute's 2016 B2B content marketing report. This should alert us to a break in the path between content creation and conversion. While leads pour in with successful top-funnel campaigns, return on that investment is falling short. ²

As customers move through the sales funnel, their needs change; what attracted them to your organization in the first place may not be enough to keep them engaged. Mid-funnel content can convert their initial interest into actual sales by deepening relationships with tentative leads, educating customers, and establishing brand loyalty. White papers are a solid, low-friction strategy for the midpoint of the marketing funnel.



“...getting visitors to engage and follow a path to conversion is at the heart of driving value from your website.” ¹

Most valuable content marketing types for moving prospects through the sales funnel according to B2B marketers in the United States as of July 2017 ³



1. Charles Nicholls, "What You Need to Know About Ecommerce Conversion Rates," Business Insider, 24 August 2010, retrieved 28 August 2020 from <https://www.businessinsider.com/understanding-which-website-conversion-rate-to-use-2010-8>

2. Erin Nelson, "Everything You Need to Know About B2B Mid-Funnel Content," Contently, 2 November 2015, retrieved 28 August 2020 from <https://contently.com/2015/11/02/everything-you-need-to-know-about-b2b-mid-funnel-content/>

3. "The Best Content Types for the Bottom-of-the-Funnel, Ironpaper, 28 November 2017, retrieved 28 August from <https://www.ironpaper.com/webintel/articles/the-best-content-types-for-the-bottom-of-the-funnel/>

What, Exactly, is a White Paper?

The simplest definition is that white papers are extended documents providing an organization's stance on a pressing issue. A white paper gives authoritative answers to a problem faced by stakeholders in a particular field. Historically, white papers were long, text-heavy informational documents. They were generally created by governments, non-profits, and researchers. In fact, the term "white paper" comes from a government document-coding system: documents coded "white" were for public distribution. Among the countless changes the Internet has brought us is the development of commercial white papers. Today's business white paper is likely to be

- a b2b marketing tool
- between 4 and 8 pages
- balanced between text and graphics
- designed to be engaging as well as informational

Examples

How Culture Drives Growth



This white paper, from OND Method Teaming, a talent management consulting firm, explores the importance of company culture and offers strategies for improvement. It focuses on the concise delivery of information, with clear summaries and interactive links.

The No-Code Solution



Betty Blocks is the digital transformation company that produced this visually engaging white paper that's entirely hosted online. The paper's purpose is to highlight the importance of creating a flexible, metrics-driven digitization plan.

How Can I Put White Papers to Work for Me?



If you've decided to add white papers to your marketing strategy, you'll want to know

- Where they belong in the marketing funnel
- What you want to accomplish with each white paper
- How white papers are generated

Marketing executives are often disappointed in the metrics of white papers that have been used as top- or bottom-of-funnel tools. The "sweet spot" of the white paper is really mid-funnel. Other content forms--videos, blog posts, social media--are more likely to create the kind of viral buzz needed at the top of the marketing funnel. And meeting with a sales team armed with product brochures and tutorials is more likely to close a sale. It's in between--when you want to establish credibility, create brand loyalty, and deepen customer relationships--that the white paper shines. Appropriate metrics for your white paper's success are return Website visits, increased engagement time, and lead generation.

Each white paper should be crafted to accomplish a clear mid-funnel goal. Your customer has come into the top of the funnel "problem-aware," and the focus of marketing should now be to make the customer "solution-aware." Use market segmentation data to choose a specific pain point that you can provide an expert solution for, and make that your goal--not to demonstrate why your product is superior, (that's for bottom-of-the-funnel content to take care of), but to educate your customer about how to solve a common problem in the industry.

Decisions, Decisions

 **Eccolo Media's ... 2010 B2B Technology Collateral Survey revealed that 76% of respondents had read a white paper to help them evaluate a technology purchase in the six months prior to the survey. In contrast, 67% had turned to case studies, 59% to video and 40% to audio. Only product brochures and data sheets were turned to more often (83%)**  ⁴

Hosting your white paper on your company Website is an obvious choice. But there are some key decisions to be made here, too. Will the white paper be a downloadable PDF, or will it be made available as a series of Web pages? Will you collect data in exchange for access to the white paper? If so, how much?

There are tradeoffs with each option. A downloadable PDF can be easily printed and shared, making it a convenient format for your customer to read and

4. Ryan Malone, "3 Powerful Reasons Why Writing White Papers is so Effective," Smartbug, 6 February 2012, retrieved 28 August 2020, from <https://www.smartbugmedia.com/blog/3-powerful-reasons-why-writing-white-papers-is-so-effective>



distribute. Some customers won't want to bother with downloading, though, preferring to simply read the complete white paper on your Website. Interactive content can also be housed more easily within a white paper that's fully available online--and engagement metrics are easier to collect. There's no reason you can't offer both options, of course, and for some businesses combining a downloadable PDF version with an online version will make the most sense.

Another choice to be made is whether to use a data-collection form as a "gate" before customers can access your white paper. Notice how Paycom has created a data-gathering gate in front of its white paper:

[Don't Underestimate Overtime Changes: A Look Into Overtime Under the FLSA and How Businesses Can Prepare.](#)

In exchange for access to your white paper, you might want this same amount of information--or you might decide to ask for as little as a name and contact information. Asking for more data can allow you to narrow leads (as in the Paycom example, where knowing company size can help Paycom sort and prioritize potential customers.) Asking for less data can encourage more potential customers to provide their contact details.

Establishing a gate in front of content, though, means some tradeoffs in SEO. Search engines can only index content they can access. If SEO is an important factor for you, consider putting part of the white paper up ahead of the gate and the rest after--or eliminate the gate altogether.

The download link or gate to your white paper should be placed on a landing page that makes a clear case for the paper's utility. In this example from Implementation Management Associates (IMA), there is a clear, bulleted list of benefits readers can expect from the white paper "[Preparing Employees for Organizational Change: What You Can Do to Increase Readiness and Reduce Resistance.](#)"

Freelance or In-House?

Great white papers--the kind that generate quality leads and showcase your brand's authority--are a specialized form of writing. In some situations it will make sense to have white papers created by your marketing team in-house, while in others it will be prudent to hire a freelancer to create them.



If you have highly-qualified white-paper writers already on your team, ROI is probably the main factor in the decision whether to keep the work in house or give it to a freelancer. Someone in your marketing division will be using several weeks' worth of work time--developing a white paper is a complex process.

Done well but not impeccably, white papers contribute to a glut of content without measurably impacting sales. If you're committing to the expense of a white paper as part of your marketing plan, you will want to allow your marketing team enough time and resources to create that excellence.



“A white paper is more than a writing task. In addition to writing and project management, a white paper requires:

- Identifying and understanding the audience
- Conducting research
- Communicating with and interviewing subject matter experts, customers, and other stakeholders
- Analyzing information
- Working closely with executives and the marketing team”⁵

5. Manya Chylinski, "3 Reasons Your White Paper is Failing" Content Marketing Institute, 7 June 2011, retrieved 28 August 2020, from <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2011/06/3-reasons-your-white-paper-is-failing/>

“Not only are decision makers highly likely to turn to white papers for information, they rate them as being the most influential collateral type in their decision making process. Eighty-three percent (83%) of the respondents in the Eccolo Media survey said that white papers were moderately to extremely influential in their decisions. Only 1% said that white papers were not at all influential.”⁶

Successful white papers use segmentation data to clearly define an audience; they take into account what that audience already knows, what its unique needs are, and how it can be spurred to action. Successful white papers present the audience with genuinely useful content--information researched from credible sources and industry experts, as well as thoughtful analysis of that information. White papers do have an element of marketing--they should be visually engaging and implicitly make the case for your company's expertise--but they are more subtle and complex than many other marketing projects. A primary reason for the failure of mediocre white papers is that they are obviously biased sales pitches rather than useful explorations of issues customers face.

At an average annual salary of \$51,193, four weeks of a marketing specialist's time is worth nearly \$4,000--before employer taxes, employee overhead, and other contributions are factored in.⁷ And if you don't have someone in-house who's ready to turn out a compelling white paper, there will be an additional time cost as your marketing team acquires the necessary skills. Depending on the cost of the team member you have available to write a white paper, it may make financial sense to keep the work in-house.

So Why Consider a Freelancer?

- **Speed.** An experienced white paper writer can work more quickly than someone who is just learning the form or who has written only a few white papers. In-house teams require, on average, more than twice as many hours as freelancers to complete *the research phase alone*.⁸ A freelancer's time is dedicated only to your white paper--there are no competing responsibilities to derail the process.
- **Expertise.** The project-management side of creating a white paper is second nature to a dedicated white paper writer--it may be a genuine administrative headache for the less experienced. A freelancer has also written white papers for many contexts and has a wider perspective than an in-house writer.
- **Known Cost.** A freelancer will offer you a fixed per-page cost. It may take more meetings than expected to gather interview material, you may decide that you want layout changes, and so on--you have no way of knowing in advance what an in-house white paper may end up costing. With a freelancer you know ahead of time exactly what the process will cost you.

6. Ryan Malone, "3 Powerful Reasons Why Writing White Papers is so Effective," Smartbug, 6 February 2012, retrieved 28 August 2020, from <https://www.smartbugmedia.com/blog/3-powerful-reasons-why-writing-white-papers-is-so-effective>.

7. "Average Marketing Specialist Salary," retrieved 28 August 2020, from https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Marketing_Specialist/Salary.

8. Chris Hardee, "5 Good Reasons to Hire an Outside White Paper Writer," retrieved 28 August 2020, from <https://thatwhitepaperguy.com/5-reasons-to-outsource-your-next-white-paper/>

Summary

- White papers are valuable assets for mid-funnel marketing.
- A business white paper is generally a visually engaging 4-8 page B2B document that offers a thorough explanation of a solution to a customer "pain point."
- Successful white papers can generate high-quality leads, deepen brand loyalty, and establish brand authority.
- Effectiveness can be measured by time-on-page, return visits, and lead generation.
- Creating a white paper is a process that begins with a clear audience and goal in mind; a number of decisions about how to host and allow access need to be made early in the process.
- Both in-house and freelance writers can create white papers.
- Freelancers offer speed, expertise, and a known cost.