

From Mindshare to Marketshare—The White Paper’s Role

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In any competitive industry, companies constantly contend for more mindshare and more marketshare. White papers, contributed articles and other marketing collateral all have an important role to play in growing any company’s share of both minds and markets.

The migration from mindshare to marketshare provides the perfect context for answering a question I’m invariably asked when writing white papers for clients: “Should these be ‘generic’ (supposedly vendor-neutral) or product-specific?” And I always give the same answer: “It depends on where the topic fits in the sales cycle.”

I’ve long believed that marketing’s primary function is to support sales, having worked in both areas. So I always consider each white paper project in the context of the full sales cycle and the changing needs at every step along the way—from getting a *qualified* prospect (a good sales lead) to gaining a *satisfied* customer when closing the deal.

This article analyzes the role white papers and similar documents can (and should) play in growing mindshare and, ultimately, marketshare. And by doing so, the approach also answers another common and important question: “What is the ideal call-to-action for a particular white paper?” The answer, of course, being: “To take the next step in the sales cycle.”

Mindshare: Generating Qualified Leads

The style at this stage is easy to remember: to *generate* a qualified lead, use a *generic* white paper; that is, one that treats the subject in a reasonably “vendor-neutral” way. Here are some ideas for generic white paper topics, potentially as a series to resonate in different ways with different target audiences across business and technical disciplines:

- The classic “Problem/Solution” piece that describes the problem, then presents the requirements of, or necessary elements in, a solution (but not the solution itself)
- The “Visionary” essay that foresees a promising future when a new, improved way of tackling a difficult challenge finally emerges
- The “Alternative Solutions Guide” that compares and contrasts the various alternatives available (a great way to “cover” the competition!)
- The “Breakthrough Technology” piece that outlines how a new innovation (but not a product per se) can benefit the target customer
- The “Best Practices Tutorial” that presents the latest and greatest approach to addressing a current need or challenge

The secret to success with any generic white paper can be summed up in a single word: *credibility*. Let’s face it: The very nature of white papers makes them suspect. They are written (or sponsored) by a vendor with an agenda—and readers know it. But readers also know how to separate fact from fiction. Making a generic white paper credible, therefore, requires a fairly objective treatment of the subject.

But here's the good news: Credibility can also be quite self-serving. Being sincerely objective turns out to be a great way to *qualify* the sales leads generated. Certainly the content will cast your solution in a favorable light. But don't overdo it. Your goal is to find those prospects who have the best fit for *your* solution. So if a competitor's approach is superior under certain circumstances or conditions, admit it. Your claims of superiority in other areas will then have much greater credibility. And besides, the reader will eventually figure it all out anyway. So why waste everyone's time and effort? The "everyone" involved, of course, includes *your* sales force. Which is why a bad lead (a poor fit for your solution) is actually worse than no lead at all.

Naturally these white papers should be posted on your Website, and can be used for fulfillment in a direct-mail or Webinar campaign. But more importantly, because they are generic and credible (Right?), they are ideal for distribution through "content consolidators" and trade organizations. The educational nature of generic white papers also makes them suitable for repurposing into contributed articles for trade magazines, e-zines and other industry sources.

Two other characteristics help ensure the success of a generic white paper. First, do not mention your product until the very end in the *Conclusion* (with the call-to-action) and/or in a separate and brief section *About the ABC Company*. A clever way to "mention" your product while keeping the piece generic is to feature it in any diagrams (but not in the caption). Sneaky? Maybe. Effective? Yes. Second, resist the temptation to make generic white papers "academic" with supposedly authoritative and unbiased treatment of the subject. Readers are not so easily fooled, and because these documents come early in the sales cycle, they serve as your *only* chance to make a good *first* impression—as a credible and dependable source of information and, perhaps someday, a solution.

The call-to-action with generic white papers is simply an invitation to learn more, usually by visiting your Website. No pressure. No need to call a sales person (yet). Certainly way too early to make any decisions. Just whet the appetite enough so that the reader *wants* to learn more—and take the next step in the sales cycle.

Selling the Solution

White papers at this stage should clearly tout your solution with all its many features, advantages and benefits. Here are some ideas for possible topics or themes that might be suitable:

- The "Solution Introduction/Overview" outlining your total offering, how it all works together, and how it integrates with existing infrastructure
- The "Enabling Technology" piece that, unlike its generic counterpart, focuses on how the breakthrough advance is utilized in, or made possible with, your product
- The "Architectural Guide" detailing how the product is designed and/or how it works
- The "Presentation Companion" that serves as a detailed leave-behind after making the obligatory PowerPoint™ product pitch
- The "Business Benefits" piece that begins the process of cost-justifying a project
- The "Behind the Scenes Story" about the product's history and development (to be told only if it's genuinely interesting)

The goal of these product-specific white papers is to help sell the solution in a clear, consistent and compelling manner. Done right, they should help make the sales folks (whether direct or via channels) more productive and, ultimately, more successful.

Credibility at this stage is still vitally important, but in a different way. You don't want unsatisfied customers. So sell the product aggressively, but realistically. Don't over-promise performance or ease-of-use or anything else. But do tout your genuine advantages without hesitation or reservation. In effect, you want to maintain the credibility you established previously while exuding complete confidence in the capabilities of your solution.

Resist the temptation to get too technical here. Do cover any aspect of the technology that is essential to appreciating its advantages or benefits. Don't bother with technical details that have little or no bearing on the decision-making process, however. While the latter may be of interest to die-hard engineers, such details are usually boring for most readers—especially when the paper gets passed from someone tech-savvy to a less enlightened coworker.

The call-to-action here normally involves contacting your company or its channel partners. Because many or even most prospects will obtain these white papers from your Website, another question is: Should you require visitors to register before making these (and perhaps the generic) papers available on the site? That depends. If you are trying to track the success of a specific campaign, then probably yes. If you are concerned about losing a prospect, however, then no. A qualified, serious prospect with a real need will call when the time is right.

Marketshare: Closing the Deal

The prospect is convinced and nearly ready to buy, but... Doubt inevitably hangs as a cloud over any major decision, and can persist in the form of “buyer's remorse” afterwards. The following white papers can help overcome these remaining hurdles:

- The “ROI/TCO Guide” that formally cost-justifies the solution to their management based on its high return on investment or industry-leading low total cost of ownership
- The “Implementation Guide” describing how (easy it is) to deploy your solution, including any planning or preparation that might be required
- A series of “Application Notes” that each describes how your solution fits (like a glove) in the prospect's particular industry or situation
- The “Common Concern FUD-Buster” that explains how your solution deals with “fear factor” issues like security, performance, conformance, interoperability, etc.
- The “Objection Mitigation” piece that describes a work-around or other means of overcoming a known limitation in your solution

For obvious reasons, this last one is best distributed on an as-needed basis and should *not* be made available on your Website. The same may be true for some of the others for a different reason: They can provide a great opportunity for the sales folks to schedule another (potentially critical) appointment with the prospect. “I want to talk with you about this important topic and go over some information I think you will find useful.”

At this stage in the sales cycle, the prospect is well qualified with an identified need and is (hopefully) ready to place an order. The call-to-action for each paper, therefore, should be to place an order for a “Starter Kit” or pilot project. If you don’t have a Starter Kit, consider creating one that makes it easy to get going with your solution. Not comfortable being so assertive? Then consider offering a Demo Kit on a loaner basis. By being credible and straightforward with the prospect, you have now earned the right to “ask for the order.”

The “Testimonial” White Paper

A recent trend in the industry is the “sponsored” white paper. Although it is quite common in any white paper to cite third party findings and projections to add credibility, these are different; they are actually written and “produced” by the industry analyst firm or independent test lab, and can be either generic or product-specific.

Are such documents effective as a testimonial of sorts? Some may be. But readers aren’t naive. They know the ABC Company paid (handsomely!) for XYZ Industry Analysts to write the piece. They also read the requisite disclaimer and pick up on the nuanced wording used to preserve the author’s independence and objectivity.

The simple fact is: readers will appreciate *any* well-written document that helps educate and elucidate—even if it does evangelize a bit. White papers have served as an accepted source of information for decades, and readers will continue to judge them, not by their cover, but by their content. Is it accurate, balanced, educational, useful and supported by the facts? If it is, then you will have a successful white paper, regardless of who writes it.

Conclusion

In the quest for more mindshare and marketshare, a white paper on virtually any subject can be appropriate and beneficial if written with an approach suitable to its step in the sales cycle. To get qualified prospects, keep them generic and credible. To sell your solution and help close the deal, don’t pull any punches. But don’t over-promise either.

Before deciding anything about your next white paper, talk with your sales force about their needs. They know if prospects aren’t fully qualified, and why. They know what consumes the most time when selling the solution. And they know what concerns or objections need to be addressed before clinching the deal.

Then, armed with an understanding of the needs throughout the sales cycle, put together a list of topics. Prioritize that list (again with help from the sales force), and begin writing. At this point you might find a companion article useful: *How to Write a Great White Paper* available at www.MarComConsultant.com. And if your staff is already focused on other priorities, check out the *Top 10 Reasons to Outsource Marketing Collateral* available on the same Website.

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