# 10 COMMON MISTAKES THAT KILL WHITE PAPER ROI

## HOW TO AVOID THEM AND GENERATE MORE LEADS

A COPYENGINEER SPECIAL REPORT

# 10 Common Mistakes That Kill White Paper ROI

## How to Avoid Them and Generate More Leads

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## INTRODUCTION

When written well and marketed properly, white papers prove again and again to be *the* most potent weapon in the technology marketer's arsenal.

In a recent series of annual surveys conducted by Eccolo Media, for example, technology buyers rated white papers the most influential, most shared and among the most consumed of all collateral types… for six consecutive years.[i]

But technology marketers often fail to get the results they desire from white paper campaigns. In another study, only 30% of IT marketers surveyed rated white papers as "very effective" marketing tools.[ii]

Why do white papers so often fail to deliver on their promise to technology marketers, even though technology buyers are so ready to seek them out and share them with their colleagues?

The answer is unwitting self-sabotage.

A number of common but deadly writing and marketing mistakes frequently damage white paper ROI. And while these mistakes are well known to expert white paper writers and white paper syndication executives, they seem to remain mysteries to most technology marketers.

CopyEngineer recently conducted a survey of over 500 technology companies to benchmark the frequency of these fatal white paper errors. Shockingly, of the white papers we reviewed, 85.4% contained ***four or more*** of the deadly mistakes we were looking for.

In fact, of the 518 tech company websites we surveyed, only 18 (less than 3.5%) offered white papers we judged to be highly effective.

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Given the high level of influence white papers wield among tech buyers, there's obviously plenty of opportunity still available for savvy marketers to capitalize upon.

This special report reveals the full results of our survey, while examining the ten deadliest common white paper mistakes and how each diminishes a white paper's effectiveness. But most importantly, it also describes steps marketers can take to avoid making each of these mistakes, so they can generate more leads and gain the greatest possible return on their white paper investment.

## Mistake #1: Boring, Product-Oriented or Misleading Title

Your white paper's title is probably the most important factor in your prospect's download decision.

*Your white paper's title is probably the most important factor in your prospect's download decision.*

It's the first thing prospects read when they encounter your white paper. It heads the description on your download page and any search results that turn it up. It figures prominently in any promotions you run.

It *must* make a good impression. Nothing minimizes white paper downloads like an uninspiring title.

*Nothing minimizes white paper downloads like an uninspiring title.*

Yet, an astounding number of white papers suffer from poor titles. I found this mistake on nearly half (47.4%) of the company websites I surveyed.

What makes for a poor white paper title? They generally fall into three categories: (1) boring, (2) product-oriented, and (3) misleading.

The problem with a **boring title** is obvious. Busy technology buyers aren't going to waste time downloading and reading something they think will bore them. Your title must grab their attention. It must be relevant to their needs. It must promise them they'll benefit *just from reading* your white paper.

The problem with a **product-oriented title** is not quite so obvious, but no less fatal. It has to do with <u>when</u> buyers download and read white papers.

In a recent survey, Eccolo Media discovered that 80% of technology buyers use white papers in the "pre-sale process" – before they send out RFPs or initiate discussions with specific vendors – while only 46% use white papers once they contact vendors and begin considering specific

*80% of technology buyers use white papers..."*before they send out RFP's or initiate discussions with specific vendors*"...*

*While only 46% use white papers once they contact vendors and begin considering specific solutions.*

**FACTORS MOST LIKELY TO DECREASE A WHITE PAPER'S INFLUENCE.**

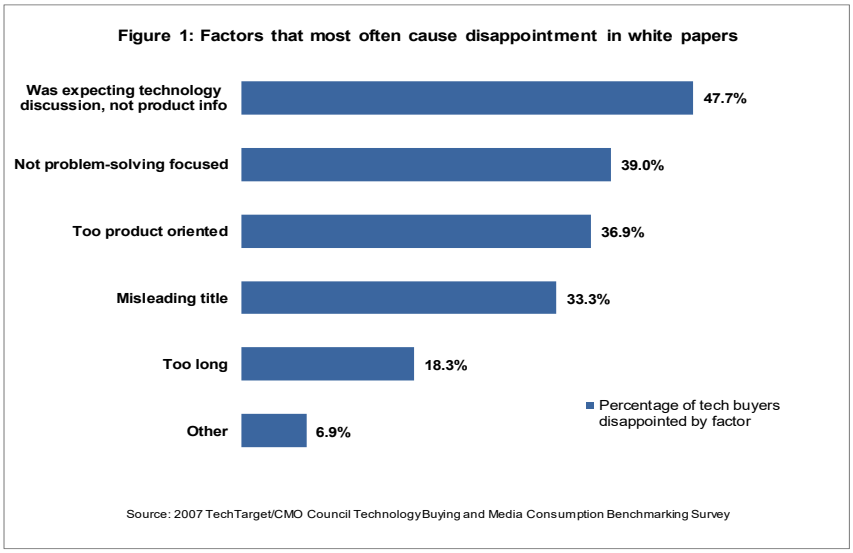
1. Poorly presented information.
2. **Too much focus on a product or vendor.**
3. No inclusion of real-life case studies.

*Source:*
*Eccolo Media B2B Technology Collateral Survey Report, www.eccolomedia.com.*

solutions. [iii]

In these early, information-gathering stages, prospects aren't interested in *specific* solutions. They don't need to hear about features. They don't want to hear about your products or services. Period. They aren't ready for that yet.

In fact, when Eccolo asked buyers to rank factors that would decrease the influence of a white paper, "Too much focus on a product or vendor" placed second, closely behind "poorly presented information". [iii] Similarly, when TechTarget and the CMO Council asked tech buyers what factors caused them to be disappointed in a white paper, 47.7% said they were "expecting technology discussion, not product info". Another 39% said they'd been disappointed by white papers that were "not problem-solving focused". And 36.9% disliked white papers that are "too product oriented" (Figure 1). [iv]




In other words, technology buyers look to white papers for problem-solving knowledge, not product info. So, the mention of a brand name in the title can be the kiss of death for a white paper campaign.

"We find that any white paper with a product name in the title does anywhere from 50 percent to an order of magnitude worse than if the title contains an educational or benefit statement," says Jay Habegger, former CEO of Bitpipe (now TechTarget).[v]

There is one exception to this "product-oriented title rule", however. That comes when the white paper being titled is what is called a "backgrounder" white paper. Backgrounder white papers – one of the three principal types of white papers – are written to provide detailed information on a product's features and benefits, either to industry jour-

*Tech buyers don't take kindly to a white paper that fails to deliver on the promise of its title.*

nalists during a product launch or to technical evaluators late in the sales process. Because of their strong product orientation, however, backgrounders are ill-suited to lead generation campaigns, for the reasons just mentioned. To attract leads and site traffic, it's better to use the other two types of white papers, the problem/solution, and the numbered list.

Interestingly, the fourth most frequent cause of disappointment among white paper readers in that TechTarget / CMO Council survey, at 33.3% (Figure 1), was our third category of poor titles, the "misleading title". [iv]

Obviously, tech buyers don't take kindly to white papers that fail to deliver on the promises of their titles. Note that the most frequent cause of reader disappointment in white papers – "expecting technology discussion, not product info" – seems to indicate the same.

If readers feel you've tricked them into downloading something that's not immediately useful to them, they'll distrust you. And that could ruin your chances of making an eventual sale.

**Fortunately, it's not hard to write an effective white paper title.**

First, choose a subject that's **problem-focused**, rather than solution-focused. Remember, buyers searching for white papers probably don't yet know what solution they need. But they'll probably recognize their problem if you spell it out for them in your title.

Then, be very specific. Your title should do most of the following:

- Identify your target reader
- Identify a problem your target reader has that your white paper will help him solve
- Promise a solution to the problem and a benefit to the target reader

Also, consider using a number in your title. Titles that include phrases like "7 Tips for" or "5 Ways to" are appealing to busy prospects, because they promise to break the information up into bite-sized chunks. Numbered list white papers always have a number in their title, but it's often possible to include a number in the title of a problem/solution paper by dividing the solution into various facets.

Look at the title and subtitle of this special report, for example. The phrases "Kill White Paper ROI" and "Generate More Leads" identify the target audience: marketing managers who use white papers in lead-generation campaigns. It identifies a potential problem they face: low ROI from their campaigns. And it promises to help them avoid 10 common

mistakes that can cause that problem.

The implied promise is that what's in the report will help the reader do his job better and make his life easier. That's what your title must convey if you want prospects to download your white paper.

## Mistake #2: The Sales Pitch in Disguise

*The single worst mistake you can make with a white paper is to turn it into a sales pitch for your product or service.*

Probably the single worst mistake you can make with a white paper is to turn it into a sales pitch for your product or service.

As just mentioned, most white paper readers (80%) are in the early stages of their buying process. They're seeking unbiased, problem-solving information. They're not yet ready to consider specific solutions, so they're not interested in product information at this point.

And the 46% who consult white papers at the end of their buying process?

Well, most in that smaller group are seeking detailed explanations of product features that will help them evaluate and compare competing solutions. They want more than just benefits, and they don't want hype. They want technical detail – a deep dive. That's what they expect from a white paper.

In other words, regardless of whether they're at the beginning or the end of their purchasing process, the last thing a white paper reader wants is a sales pitch.

*84% of technology buyers rated quality of educational information to be either "very important" or "extremely important"*

*Yet, only 53% of tech marketers rated the educational value of their materials to be "very good" to "excellent"*

But it seems many tech marketers can't resist. In my survey, 48.1% of the white papers I reviewed turned out to be blatant product promotions.

KnowledgeStorm and MarketingSherpa found a similar dichotomy between what tech buyers want and what tech marketers offer. In a recent study they conducted, 84% of technology buyers rated quality of educational info to be either "very important" or "extremely important" to them. Yet only 53% of the technology marketers they surveyed judged the educational value of their marketing materials to be "very good" or "excellent" (Figure 2).[vi]

Remember, a white paper is not a brochure. Its appeal is logic, not emotion.

In most white papers, your objective is not to show what your product or your company can do. Instead, you want to convince your readers that you thoroughly understand their problem, that the need to address the problem is urgent, and that the solution you propose – not your specific

*A white paper is not a brochure. Its appeal is logic, not emotion.*

product or service itself, but the idea behind it – is the best and only reasonable solution to their problem.

**Figure 2: Importance of content educational value to tech buyers vs delivery by marketers**

Source: KnowledgeStorm/MarketingSherpa Survey: How Technology Marketers Meet Buyers' Appetite for Content

To do this, you need to make an airtight case for your solution. So, like a good lawyer, your white paper needs to present a lot of hard proof. Proof that the problem exits. Proof that it's urgent. Proof that your solution is the best one currently possible.

And even if your white paper is aimed at readers at the end to the sales process, it still needs to prove your solution can deliver the benefits you've promised. It must be driven by facts and logic. It must provide your readers solid information they can use to make a purchasing decision.

Credible proof comes in many forms. These include:

- Statistics
- Benchmarks
- Test results
- Verifiable historical facts
- Expert third-party opinions or endorsements
- Study and survey findings

Avoid typical marketing claims in your white papers. Don't dwell on your product. Better yet, don't talk about your product *directly* until the very end of your white paper. Instead, define a generic solution "class" (of which your product may be the only member, or one of very few) and make your case for that class. This helps reduce your reader's perception of bias.

And if your product is the only member of this generic solution class you've

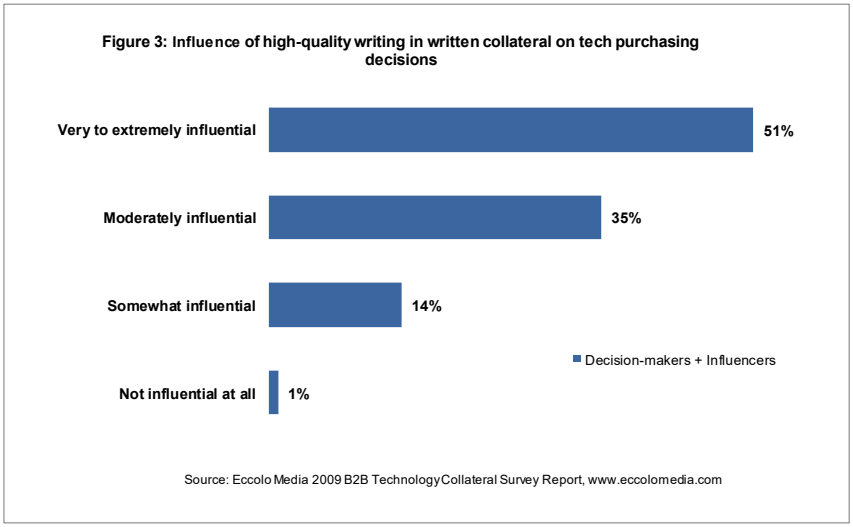
defined, so much the better; you'll have eliminated all your competition from your prospect's consideration.

And above all, back up everything you say with compelling evidence.

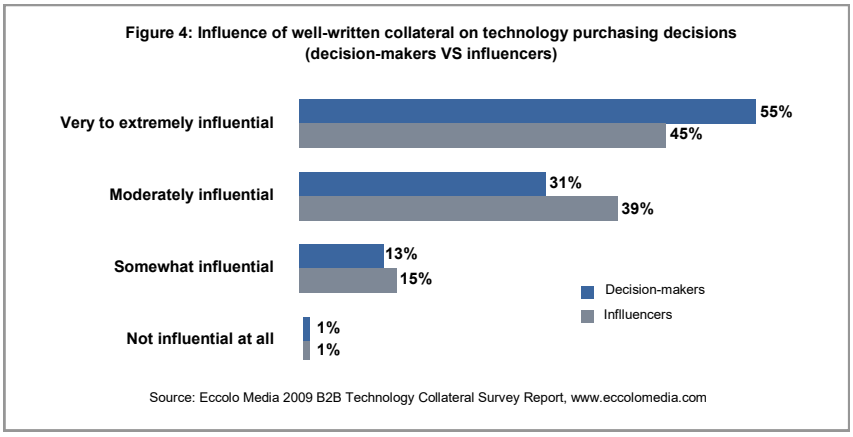
## Mistake #3: Unprofessional Writing

One of the more interesting findings from Eccolo Media's recent series of surveys is the high value business buyers place on professional-quality writing. In their 2009 study, 86% of respondents considered high-quality writing in marketing collateral to be at least moderately influential in their purchasing decisions. And 51% rated high-quality writing either very influential or extremely influential (Figure 3).[iii]

*High-quality writing is especially appreciated by business decision-makers.*




The same study found high-quality writing is especially appreciated by business decision-makers. Of that group, 55% rated high-quality writing as very to extremely influential, compared to 45% amongst purchasing influencers (Figure 4).[iii]





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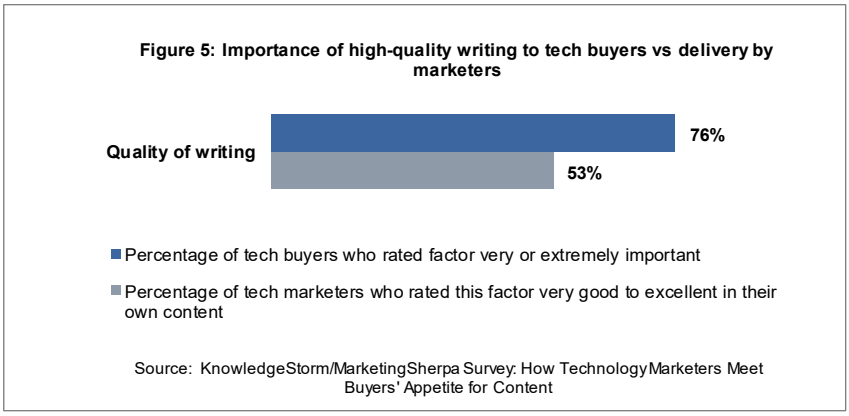
KnowledgeStorm and MarketingSherpa recorded similar data from technology buyers in their survey. They also found technology marketers failing to keep up in this area. Of the buyers in their survey, 76% rated quality of writing to be very to extremely important. In contrast, only 59% of the marketers considered the quality of writing in their own marketing materials to be very good or excellent (Figure 5).[vi]




And that may be an optimistic assessment.

In my own survey, nearly half (49.7%) of the white papers I reviewed suffered from unprofessional writing. Symptoms observed included:

- Long, cumbersome, non-conversational paragraphs
- Sentences that were poorly constructed or lacking in variation
- Poor rhetorical structure (interruptions in the logical flow of ideas, etc.)
- Gaps or inconsistencies in logic
- Undefined technical terms
- Poor or missing sources

Why do so many tech industry white papers suffer from these problems?

Well, many marketing managers seem to believe it will take too much time and effort to bring an outside writer up to speed on their technology. Those without in-house writing staff often enlist the help of an engineer, scientist or product manager. Their thinking may be that thought leadership pieces ought to come directly from the thought leaders themselves.

But asking a subject matter expert (SME) to a write white paper is usually a mistake – for three reasons.

*SMEs are often too close to the subject they're writing about. They have a tendency to include too many details that are unimportant and possibly confusing to the reader.*

First, many SMEs don't write well. Those who do, while they may be accustomed to writing specifications, proposals and conference papers, are generally unfamiliar with writing marketing white papers. The dry, dense style normally found in the former is poorly suited to the latter. It takes practice – and a strong familiarity with best practices – to style an effective white paper.

Second, SMEs are too close to the subject they're writing about. They tend to include too many details that are unimportant and possibly confusing to the reader.

Graphic designer and copywriter Roger C. Parker, author of *Looking Good in Print* and *Design to Sell* calls this "the curse of knowledge."

> *"Those associated with developing and selling breakthrough products may not be able to write about them from the prospect's point of view. A better solution is to have someone outside the firm interview those involved in creating the new product."* [vii]

*"Those associated with developing and selling breakthrough products may not be able to write about them from the prospect's point of view.*

*A better solution is to have someone from outside the firm interview those involved in creating the product."*

*- Roger C. Parker*

Finally, most SMEs simply don't have enough time to devote to a white paper project. They have their own work to do, and plenty of it. They must give those tasks top priority. That tends to delay white paper projects, which require time, patience and a lot of work.

There's an adage among writers that great writing is largely the product of rewriting. I believe that's especially true of white papers. Most of the poorly written white papers I observed in my survey suffered from a lack of time put in on editing and revision.

How do you cure unprofessional writing? Hire a professional writer with white paper experience.

White paper writers with good interview skills will be able to draw from your experts everything they need to put together an effective white paper for your target audience. And they can produce it in far less time than it would take your SMEs to do it themselves.

Plus, professional writing and editing of your white paper will result in:

- A shorter review cycle
- Earlier distribution
- Better prospect response
- More leads and sales

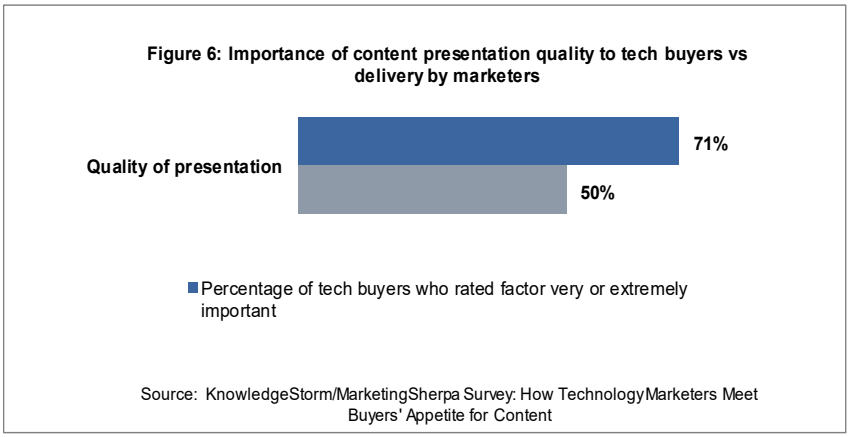
All of which means higher ROI from your white paper campaign.

## Mistake #4: Poor Design / Lack of Illustrations

Another important factor in a white paper's success is the effectiveness of its presentation.

Seventy-one percent of technology buyers surveyed by KnowledgeStorm and MarketingSherpa said "quality of presentation" was a "very important" or "extremely important" factor in their evaluation of technology information. Interestingly, only 50% of the technology marketers in that survey felt the quality of presentation in their own materials was "very good" or "excellent" (Figure 6).[vi]

*Poor design or a lack of good illustrations can put readers off and lower the perceived value of your white paper.*




Poor design or a lack of good illustrations can put readers off and lower the perceived value of your white paper. These errors make your white paper less interesting, less scannable, and harder to read.

Poorly designed white papers most often come in one of two forms: the "Wall of Gray", and the "Marketing Slick".

The "wall of gray" is characterized by narrow margins, pages dense with text, minimal white space, and very little that adds visual interest (few illustrations, text boxes, etc.). In short, it looks like a legal brief: intimidating and boring.

*The "marketing slick" is the ad agency's way of turning two pages of marketing copy into an eight-page document they think they can call a white paper.*

At the other extreme, the "marketing slick" white paper has the look of a brochure. Wide graphic expanses and stock photography dominate. Text is confined to a small portion of each page. The illustrations – often featuring smiling business people around a conference table, or serious, scientific types in lab coats – are chosen primarily to convey feeling rather than useful information.

The "marketing slick" is the ad agency's way of turning two pages of

marketing copy into an eight-page document they choose to call a white paper. And it's a sure way to turn off an engineer or other technical information-seeker. As Bob Bly, author of *The White Paper Marketing Handbook*, says:

> *"Engineers look down on advertising and advertising people, for the most part… Don't use slick graphics that immediately identify a brochure or spec sheet as advertising. The engineer will be quick to reject such material as 'fluff'."* [viii]

*Classic white paper design is an elegant middle ground between the "wall of gray" and the "marketing slick".*

Poor design and a lack of good illustrations are frequent problems in tech industry white papers. In my survey, for example, a whopping 70.8% of the white papers I looked at suffered noticeably from poor design (65.4%) or a dearth of helpful illustrations (30.3%) – in most cases both.

The remedy is classic white paper design, coupled with a generous supply of meaningful illustrations.

Classic white paper design is an elegant middle ground between the "wall of gray" and the "marketing slick". It features:

- Wide margins. Especially on one side of the page to leave room for pull quotes
- Narrow columns of text for easy reading
- Lots of white space breaking text in to manageable sections creating a reader-friendly appearance
- Plenty of emphasized text elements that grab the attention of scanners and provide visual interest for readers, including:
    - ◊ Headlines
    - ◊ Subheads
    - ◊ Bullets
    - ◊ Pull quotes
    - ◊ Side bars
- Plenty of informative illustrations

Good illustrations with informative captions are an important part of effective white paper design. Illustrations add visual interest, breaking up the "wall of gray" and making your white paper look more inviting to readers.

They're also much more memorable than text. Graphs and charts replace a lot of words and are easier to understand.

*Together, good design and good illustrations enhance the readability and scan-ability of your white paper.*

And the captions are just as important as the illustrations themselves. Besides helping readers fully understand the illustrations, effective captions capture the attention of scanners, building their interest and drawing them into your white paper.

Plus, captions get high readership. "Studies show…captions get twice the readership of body copy." says Bly. [ix] Advertising legend David Ogilvy agrees: "Captions should appear under all your photographs," he writes. "Twice as many people read them as read body copy." [x]

Together, good design and good illustrations enhance the readability and scannability of your white paper. This is extremely important to today's primary audience for white papers: busy business executives. This group has an extreme need for information, but almost no time to gather it.

A professional copywriter with white paper knowledge will plan for these design considerations. He'll provide suggestions for illustrations and include the necessary text elements – including captions – that will make your white paper visually appealing to technology purchasing decision-makers and influencers.

## Mistake #5: Wrong Length for Audience

As white paper readership has shifted in the past 15 years or so – from almost exclusively engineers to primarily executives – white papers have shrunk to meet the needs of a more time-pressed audience. Gone are the days when white papers might run 30 to 50 pages or more.

Today's white paper readers are demanding shorter white papers. TechTarget and the CMO Council found "too long" to be the fifth most frequent cause of disappointment among white paper readers (Figure 1). [iv] And when Eccolo Media asked technology buyers how long a white paper should be, an overwhelming 96% felt the ideal length would be 10 pages or less, with 6 pages being the most common answer (Figure 7). [iii]

Experts at a recent white paper writing and marketing seminar agreed, but they provided more practical guidelines (shown in the sidebar at left) based on the audience for a given white paper.

Note that three pages (not counting the cover page and any "About Us" information) are considered the *absolute minimum* for both executive and technical audiences. It's virtually impossible to explore a problem and make a case for a solution in less than three pages.

Using these criteria in my own survey, I found that nearly a quarter (23.8%) of the 185 white papers I reviewed were the wrong length for

**White Paper Length Guidelines**

**For executive white papers:**

Minimum length = 3 pages

Ideal length = 6 to 10 pages

Maximum length = 12 pages

**For technical white papers:**

Minimum length = 3 pages

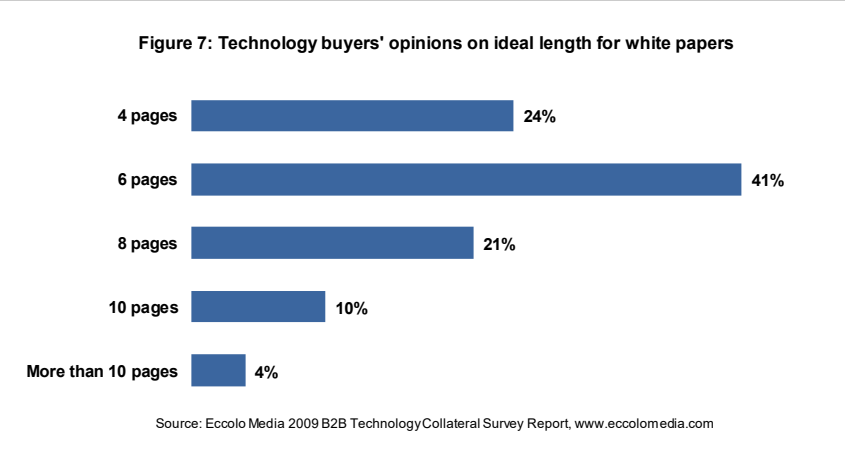
Ideal length = 6 to 12 pages

Maximum length = 15 pages

*Source: White Paper Success Summit 2009*

*Today's white paper readers are demanding shorter white papers.*

their target audience.




Here are several simple remedies for avoiding and correcting "wrong length" white papers.

**For white papers that are too long:**

- Split long drafts. Divide lengthy discussions into two related topics.
- Choose narrow topics. Don't cram everything into one white paper.
- Break big problems into distinct parts.
    - ◊ If budget allows, create a series.
    - ◊ If budget is limited, choose the most important problem.

**For white papers that are too short:**

- Explore the problem thoroughly.
    - ◊ Divide into 3 to 5 sub-problems and examine each in detail.
    - ◊ Review historical approaches to solving the problem.
    - ◊ Examine market trends driving the need for a new approach.
    - ◊ Build a convincing case for your solution. Highlight its benefits.
    - ◊ Show the drawbacks of existing or alternative solutions.
    - ◊ Include plenty of proof and cite sources.
- Don't cut corners. While it's great to re-purpose content, you can't simply take a two-page article, slap in into PDF format and call it a white paper. You need to expand it.

Bear in mind that while it's important to try to stay within them to avoid losing readers, guidelines are only that: guidelines. There will be exceptions.

Take this white paper for example. I considered breaking it in two (e.g., *5 Common Mistakes…* and *5 More Common Mistakes…*). But offering two white papers with similar titles – either together or sequentially – would have lowered the perceived value of each and created several marketing problems for me. Since I wanted this to be a practical guide – and offer the single, handy checklist you've received along with it – it was simply more logical and practical to keep all the information together.

In other words, the only reason to split the draft was the length, and that was outweighed by other considerations.

Also, making an airtight business case for a highly technical solution may *require* more than twelve pages. In that case, you may want to consider a counter-intuitive approach. Adding a page – a one-page executive summary at the beginning – helps busy decision-makers deal with longer white papers. Summing up the problem and the merits of your solution allows them to quickly decide whether to pass your white paper to their staff for further consideration.

## Mistake #6: No Call to Action

Once you've concluded your arguments and successfully made your case for your solution, there are still two things you need to do in your white paper:

- Tell readers who you are and what you do.
- Tell readers what they should do next.

Few marketers forget to tell readers about their company at this point (They're far more likely to have already said too much). You'll almost always find an "About Us" blurb at the end of a white paper.

But many fail to tell the reader what his or her next step should be.

They fail to provide a clear "call to action."

Once you've convinced your prospects of the validity and superiority of your solution, you need to suggest to them the next logical step they should take to capitalize on the knowledge they've gained.

Remember, your prospects are very busy. They're distracted. They don't have time to think about what to do next about your solution. They simply won't figure it out for themselves.

It may seem silly, but direct mail testing has shown that giving clear instructions improves response. If you don't tell your readers what to do, they won't act. They'll just go away… and forget about you.

*If you don't tell your readers what to do, they won't act. They'll just go away…and forget about you.*

This was the most frequent mistake I found in my survey.

Of the white papers I reviewed, *more than two-thirds* (71.9%) *had no call to action whatsoever*. Another 5.9% had a very weak call to action – usually inviting readers to visit the same website from which they had just downloaded the white paper – not a logical step forward. In total, less than a quarter (22.2%) of the white papers I reviewed had what I would call a good call to action.

**So, what makes for a good call to action?**

In general, a good call to action:

- Suggests a very specific next step your prospect should take,
- Follows logically from your white paper, and
- Is appropriate for where the prospect is in the buying process.

And while that may sound a bit complicated, it's really quite easy to accomplish.

To make sure your call to action is appropriate to where your prospect is in the buying process, all you need to do is divide your prospects into two groups and devise a separate call to action for each. The two groups are:

- **Those who <u>don't</u> have an immediate need** for your offering, but may in the future, and
- **Those who <u>do</u> have an immediate need** and are looking to purchase soon.

The first group – the majority of your readers – is simply gathering information. They're not ready to talk about a specific solution. So, they don't want to waste time on the phone with a salesperson.

For them, the logical next step is always to "find out more" – to get more in-depth information on the solution just described in your white paper – in a way that doesn't involve any human contact. And since this group represents the vast majority, you'll address them first.

The call to action for this "information gathering" group usually takes the following form:

> *To find out more about [name of company]'s solutions for [problem addressed by white paper] and how you can [gain key benefits described in white paper], [do this].*

The "do this" part is the next step you want your prospect to take. It should be very specific.

Don't just invite readers to visit your website. Invite them to visit a specific page related to your solution. Don't just direct them to your "resources" page. Send them to a landing page for a specific case study or a related white paper.

Again, you need to remember that white paper readers are busy. They don't want to spend a lot of time seeking information. They want to find it right away. The easier you can make that for them, the more likely they are to accept your message and favor your company and solution.

Next, after you've addressed the bulk of your audience, it's time to add a second call to action – one that addresses that small sliver of readers who need your solution now.

The step you want these "sales ready" prospects to take, of course, is to get in touch with your sales team. And to make that step flow logically from your white paper, all you have to do is tie it to the solution that your white paper recommends. That can be done with a sentence like this:

> *If you would like to discuss how our [white paper problem] solutions can be best applied to your situation, call [sales dept. telephone number] to talk with one of our engineers, or email us at [sales inquiry email address].*

If you want the best possible response to your white paper campaign, don't leave your prospects wondering what they should do next when they've finished reading. Give them their next logical step with a strong call to action.

## Mistake #7: Registration-Free Access

One of the most frequent mistakes I saw in my survey was unrestricted access to white paper content. Of the websites where I found white papers, 61% allowed visitors to download them without registration.

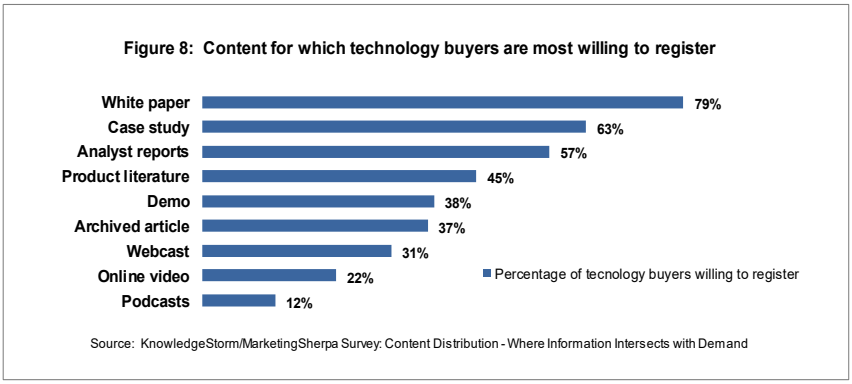
Some marketers may feel that requiring registration will reduce downloads, keeping their white paper out of the hands of many potential customers. Yet 79% of tech buyers surveyed by KnowledgeStorm and MarketingSherpa said they would willingly register to download a white paper. That was the highest total among nine media types, including demos and analyst reports (Figure 8).[xi]

Allowing visitors to download your white paper without registering for it creates two problems for you.

First, you get no contact data. No contact data means no lead: you lose

countless opportunities to make additional marketing touches, nurture and qualify the prospect, track his or her activity and interest, and reinforce your branding.

*79% of tech buyers said they would willingly register to download a white paper.*




Second, there's no anticipation. Your prospect just clicks on a link and he's got your white paper. There's no build-up. No fanfare. No excitement. You've minimized the perceived value of your content. Chances are, your white paper will be quickly forgotten.

The **remedy** is also twofold: **registration + briefly delayed fulfillment**

Obviously, to secure contact data and generate a lead, you need to require registration. But as I'll explain in a moment (under Mistake #8), your registration form doesn't have to be onerous.

The secret to creating anticipation for your white paper, on the other hand, lies in "delayed gratification." Don't simply let visitors click on a link to download your white paper. Tell them they will receive their white paper *by email*. Deliver it via autoresponder.

*The secret to creating anticipation for your white paper lies in "delayed gratification."*

Email fulfillment creates several advantages for you:

- You'll get a valid email address.
- You can exclude popular personal and temporary email domains, if you choose.
- You can build anticipation, through a series of staged emails.
- You build brand recognition with multiple touches.
- You begin to build a relationship with your prospect.

Remember how you received this report?

Following registration, you got an immediate confirmation of your order. Minutes later, you received an email thanking you for your order and offering you a subscription to my monthly e-zine and my current sign-up premium. Only after that did the report arrive.

You'll also receive, if you haven't already, a follow-up email to make sure you received your report.

Plus, if you signed up for my monthly e-letter, you'll have received a confirmation of that order, an email with a link to the download page of my sign-up premium, and the latest issue.

That's a minimum of four contacts – and as many as seven – in a relatively short timeframe. And that's not counting your trip to my website to order the report and any e-zine issues or related offers I might send you.

Every touch you make increases your name recognition and helps you forge a relationship with your prospect. And because your prospect is expecting an email from you, you increase both your open rate and the chances your prospect will actually read your white paper.

You lose all that if you don't require registration.

One caveat: there are circumstances in which you may not want to require registration. If, for example, your white paper is a product "backgrounder" – one meant to provide detailed product information for prospects at the final stages of the buying process – you may wish to forgo registration for the convenience of your potential buyer. You probably already have that prospect in your CMS, anyway.

*Every touch you make increases your name recognition and helps you forge a relationship with your prospect .*

If your objective is lead generation, however, you need to require registration.

In the next section, we'll look at what to ask for in your registration form.

## Mistake #8: Requiring Too Much Data at Registration

Almost as bad as no registration is the opposite: requiring too much information from the requester.

A registration form that looks like a lot of work creates barriers between you and your prospect. Long registration forms have also been shown to lower conversion rates and ROI. Yet, I found this mistake in over 35% of websites that required registration.

Filling out a long form tries your prospects' patience. They immediately begin to ask themselves:

*A registration form that looks like a lot of work creates barriers between you and your prospect.*

- Why is all this required?
- Am I going to be bombarded with sales calls?
- Is this really worth my time?

Those doubts will cause many to choose NOT to download your white paper.

The solution, of course, is to collect the minimum data necessary to maintain contact. I suggest requiring only first and last name and email address. You might also consider adding one or two optional fields – like job title, company or website URL.

Using a shorter form can boost your conversion rate and ROI.

Marketo, the marketing automation company, recently conducted a test of registration forms with five, seven and nine fields. The five-field form increased conversion rate by 11.7% over the seven-field form and by 34% over the nine-field form, while reducing cost per lead by 10.6% and 25.4% respectively. [xii]

Marketo also found it's cheaper for them to use a shorter form and contract with an outside vendor to complete the record, than it is to capture more information in the registration form.

So remember, you don't need to qualify your prospect all in one go. Build trust first. Additional data can be collected later.

## Mistake #9: Not Enough Information Prior to Registration

In their recent survey, KnowledgeStorm and MarketingSherpa found a huge discrepancy between the amount of information technology buyers want to see before they register for a white paper, and the amount technology marketers think they need to provide.

When asked how much the amount of detail in the overview factored into their decision to register, 72% of technology buyers called it a major factor. In contrast, only 34% of technology marketers said the overview was a major registration factor (Figure 9).[xi]

And while 74% of the technology buyers surveyed wanted to see "at least a paragraph or more" of abstract before deciding whether to register, 52% of the technology marketers said they provide two sentences or less (Figure 10).[xi]

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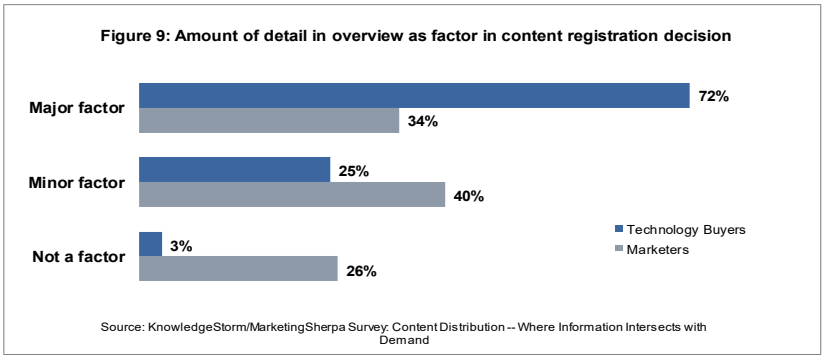


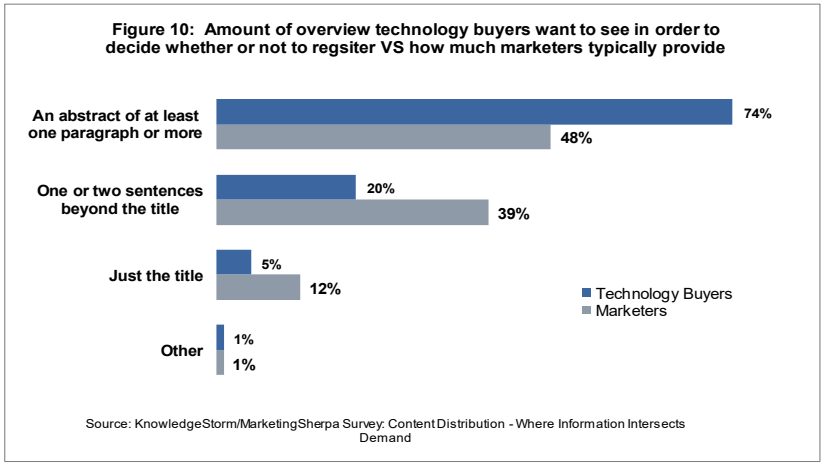


In my own survey, more than 30% of the websites I visited provided two sentences or less of overview. Frequently only a title. Many required registration to access a document library before showing visitors a list of titles and descriptions – another big mistake.

It's obvious from the KnowledgeStorm/MarketingSherpa data that tech buyers want to know what they're getting before they register for it. They want to know if it's going to be worth their time to register, download and read your white paper. They want to know if you're really offering a possible solution to their problem.

The little extra effort it takes to provide a paragraph or so of description can make a big difference in registration rate and ROI for your campaign.

*Tech buyers want to know what they're getting before they register for it.*

## Mistake #10: Post and Pray Syndrome

The final mistake I encountered frequently in my survey is what I call "post and pray" syndrome: Merely posting white papers on the corporate website and *praying* prospects will find them.

Nearly 58% of the websites on which I found white papers made

absolutely no effort to call white papers to visitors' attention. White papers were not advertised on the home page or on relevant product pages. There was no evidence of integration with other marketing efforts. I could find no landing pages linked to online ads, email marketing, social media, etc.

White papers on these post and pray sites were usually buried several clicks deep on a 'resources' or 'downloads' page. Sometimes, they could only be found through keyword search.

The problem with a post and pray strategy is obvious. If prospects don't know your white paper exists, don't see promotions for it, and can't easily find it while browsing your website, you will realize very little ROI. The effort and expense you put into creating that white paper will be wasted.

*Nearly 58% of the websites on which I found white papers made absolutely no effort to call those white papers to visitors' attention.*

The cure for Post and Pray Syndrome is to give your prospects multiple paths to your white papers. In other words, make it very easy for visitors to find your white papers on your website and build campaigns to drive traffic to them.

Advertise your white papers through a variety of channels. Feature them prominently on your home page and related product pages. Promote them in your social media channels, your company newsletter or e-zine, as well as trade journals. Consider placing banner ads on relevant industry websites.

Why not offer your white paper to prospects in a direct mail package? Or in an email message. Eccolo Media found that a download from a direct response campaign was the second most frequently used channel for receiving a white paper. [iii]

*A download from a direct response campaign was the second most frequently used channel for receiving a white paper.*

You can provide links to your white papers in webinars, podcasts, and social media posts.

White paper syndication sites, like Find White Papers, IDG TechNetwork and TechTarget, not only put your white paper where thousands of technology professionals are searching for them. They'll also suggest it to technology professionals who have expressed interest in similar white papers.

And where should all that advertising direct your prospect?

I would suggest a dedicated landing page on your website.

Having a landing page for each of your featured white papers – instead of piling them together with all your other collateral on a resources page—gains you several advantages.

A dedicated landing page describes your white paper in isolation from other offers. This increases its perceived value and reduces the likelihood your prospect will be distracted while evaluating it. And as previously mentioned, providing several paragraphs of description also increases conversions.

Plus, "selling" your white paper on the landing page greatly reduces the amount of selling you have to do in any paid advertising that links to it. So you reduce your lead-gen advertising costs, as well.

## Conclusion

Recent studies show that white papers are still the most powerful weapon in the technology marketer's arsenal. They act much like the fabled Trojan Horse: Offered as a free gift, they're welcomed into organizations, flying under the anti-marketing radar of purchasing decision-makers and influencers.

But unlike the horse, white papers are obviously valuable, and sought after by their target audience. They're also easily distributed, and thus, highly viral.

As such, white papers offer big benefits in both lead generation and demand generation, and a huge competitive advantage to savvy marketers – those who know how to avoid the deadly mistakes that can sabotage a white paper's effectiveness.

But while white papers offer the potential for very high ROI, their development can be complicated, time-consuming, and expensive. Much can go wrong with a white paper project that is carried out by writers and marketers who are unaware of the potential pitfalls and their consequences.

Fortunately, help is available.

A professional marketing copywriter with white paper experience and a technical background can help you avoid the deadly mistakes that kill the ROI of most white paper projects, and turn around your white paper project in a reasonable and predictable amount of time.

Plus, a professional writer with good interviewing skills will get the most out of your technical staff, while leaving them free to do what they do best.

*White papers offer big benefits in both lead generation and demand generation, and a huge competitive advantage to savvy marketers...*


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## About the Author

John Cole, the CopyEngineer, is a freelance business-to-business copywriter specializing in lead-generation and demand-generation content for the technology, software and aerospace industries.

Before shifting his career focus to marketing, John worked 20 years in the aerospace industry as an avionic systems engineer and project manager. He now combines his extensive hands-on technical experience with skills in direct response and B2B copywriting to help high-tech companies generate more quality leads, and move those leads down the sales funnel.

## Next Steps

If you'd like to receive more tips like these—on a variety of lead-generation and demand-generation topics—sign up for my monthly e-zine, *Technical Response*. You can learn more, and subscribe, at www.CopyEngineer.com/Technical_Response_sign-up/.

And if you have a white paper campaign in mind, or any other project coming up that needs to appeal to business decision-makers and pass muster with engineers, why not give me a call at **(+39) 011 569 4951.** You can also email me at **info@CopyEngineer.com**. Or use the contact form at www.CopyEngineer.com/contact.

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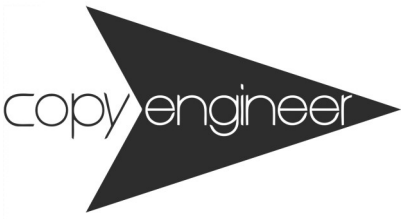



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