

Writing White Papers

Forrest Warthman
Warthman Associates
www.warthman.com

The General Approach

In the technology industries, a white paper is typically an overview of a technology, architecture, product, or issue. It offers companies and industry organizations a standard format with which to promote their ideas and products. The effectiveness of a white paper depends not only on the relevance of its subject—certainly the most important factor—but also the format in which it is presented. Readers have come to expect a somewhat predictable format, one which answers a progression of commonly asked questions. Adherence to the format allows readers to move rapidly through the white paper, letting them absorb the message quickly.

The basic progression of questions that a white paper typically answers is:

- What is the problem to be solved?
- What kinds of solutions are available?
- Which solution is best, and why?

For example, a white paper about a product might be organized to answer the following questions that a potential customer may have:

- What is the customer's problem, and by what symptoms does it manifest itself?
- What technologies have been tried and are currently available to solve the problem?
- Which technology solves the problem best, and why is it the best choice?
- How is the producer uniquely qualified to implement this technology?
- Which of the producer's products implements the technology, and to what extent?
- How does the product work, and how is it optimized for this particular problem?

The white paper may go on to discuss prerequisite resources for using the product or how the product fits into the customer's work habits, although these topics are often left to separate documents like product specifications or data sheets.

Guidelines for Effectiveness

Given this general approach, there are several qualities that make it work effectively. All of them depend on a clear understanding of the target readers. In a word, effectiveness depends on *audience focus*. Here are some of the guidelines:

- *Put "the bottom line" at the top.* Many writers put the conclusion of a paper at the end, but that is often the least effective location. Most readers start at the beginning; very few continue to the end. Readers' attention is greatest at the beginning. That's the best place to put a summary of your entire message, including the conclusions you wish the reader to draw. White papers, unlike books, are scanned or read quickly for content. Other quick-read communications, like advertisements and newspaper articles, use headlines and paragraph summaries to hold reader interest. White papers can benefit by the same approach.
- *Address customers as if they were investors.* Seasoned investors are a discriminating audience. They judge technologies, products, and ideas on the basis of objective information about market supply and demand and the track records of the companies or people involved. They respond to factual information, not unsubstantiated claims or boasting. Getting their attention involves building trust by stating things that are interesting, relevant, and true. A white paper that convinces prospective investors is also likely to convince many prospective customers.

- *Orient your audience; avoid hidden assumptions.* Descriptions written by in-house product managers, designers, or marketers often contain acronyms and unwritten assumptions understood only by their close-knit working group. This can result in too-quick a dive into details that outsiders, even expert outsiders, cannot follow. Before diving into details, describe the general nature and working environment of your product or technology. Start with the basics: Is it a piece of hardware or software? Does it reside at your site or mine? Does it require other resources I should know about? How does it interface with my current product mix and work habits?
- *Be specific; avoid generalities.* After providing preliminary orientation, get to the technical heart of your subject. If your prospective customers are technology experts, don't try to teach beginners about your subject. Generalities or repetition of common knowledge drive intelligent readers away. Instead, describe specific aspects that will ring true with your target audience. Consumption in the technology industry is lead by intelligent people. They are the ones who buy effective solutions first and promote them by word-of-mouth (and word-of-email) to the rest of the community.
- *Differentiate your solution from others.* It's one thing to claim your product solves a problem. But it's more convincing to describe *why* it does so best—Why is your solution superior to another that claims to do the same thing? Intelligent buyers shop the competition. They try to differentiate between similar choices. Providing the differentiation for them saves them time, one of their most valuable resources.
- *Cite credible, objective third-party evidence.* Intelligent readers look for trustworthy evidence to substantiate claims by self-interested parties. Providing the evidence for them not only saves them time but also buys you credibility. Finding meaningful testimonials by industry pundits takes time but is well worth the effort.
- *Illustrate objects with pictures.* We've all learned that a picture is worth a thousand words. But in fact, only some pictures are this valuable. Pictures are effective when they help audiences interpret your written message. They are especially good at indicating the *names* of objects and the *relations* between those objects. With names and relations thus identified in pictures, they can be referred to clearly in the text.
- *Use simple, common English; don't try to coin new words.* The world of technology is global. Many audiences have learned English as a second language, and many native-English audiences read the language casually, without careful discrimination of words or syntax. They can be confused by messages that contain complex sentences, new words, or new spins on old words. Speaking to these audiences effectively requires simple, common English that conveys the message accurately and unambiguously. That kind of writing carries power—the power to explain and convince.

The best ingredient for an effective white paper is a great solution to a technical problem. The next best ingredient is great writing. That's what Warthman Associates specializes in: great writing about great products and ideas.