

# Chapter 6: Why the Traditional White Paper Won't Work

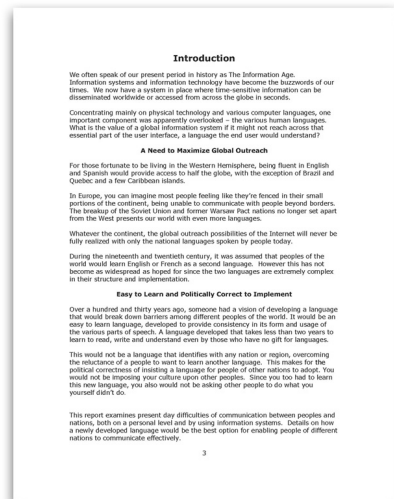
Take a look at a traditional white paper, such as one published by a government or academic entity or a scientific researcher. Most of these groups use a traditional all-text format with one or more of the following attributes that are no longer effective with today's time- and attention-challenged executive reader:

- Large page length
- Text-oriented design
- Paragraph-centric delivery mechanisms
- A lack of summaries (executive or concluding)
- A lack of graphics

## A Large Page Length

As the white paper evolved from its origins as a government document in the 1920s, one attribute that has remained is its ability to present as much relevant data on an issue as possible. This strategy has resulted in the creation of large tomes of information, often ranging in a document length from ten to fifty pages, and on occasion, several hundred pages!

Unfortunately, given the demands on their time and attention, most executives cannot read these large documents. When confronted by a ten- to fifty-page white paper, most will



quickly skim through it, send it to a subordinate in their organization, or opt out of reading it altogether.

As the responsibility to read these large white papers gets pushed down into lower levels of the organizational chart, the ability for the marketer to influence the key decision makers become more difficult.

## **A Text-Oriented Design**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, documents were produced using analog devices such as pens, typewriters, and large printing presses that made the process of incorporating pictures or illustrations very difficult. As white papers became more popular, especially in business circles, this text-oriented format became an unwritten standard that was commonly associated with the entire white paper medium.

After many decades, even with the advent of personal computers that can easily incorporate text and graphics, most white papers continued to use an all-text format as the only means of delivering critical business information. As a result, many organizations still feel that the text-oriented design is the best format to use when producing a white paper. Unfortunately, an all-text format makes rapid reader engagement more difficult, since large portions of information must be read to uncover bottom-line solution messages. Today's time- and attention-challenged business executives simply don't have the time their previous counterparts had for this task.

## **A Paragraph-Centric Delivery Mechanism**

As far back as the stone tablet, mankind has produced information on a line-by-line or paragraph-by-paragraph basis for every form of communication. For modern white papers, it stands to reason that this same orientation would be applied.

The problem with the paragraph-centric approach is the assumption held by the marketer that the reader *will* read each

paragraph in an established order to understand the key messages in the paper. If the reader doesn't follow that specific order or skips ahead to another page, key messages that the marketer intended to be delivered to the reader may be missed.

The paragraph approach used by most traditional white papers also assumes that readers have lots of time on their hands to read each and every paragraph in a set order, starting with the first page, continuing to the second, then the third, etc., until the entire white paper is read. With the limited amount of time available for reading in today's demanding business environment, the probability that an executive decision maker will read an entire text-heavy white paper is quite low. Most will pass on the opportunity to read these documents altogether.

### **The Lack of Summaries (Executive or Concluding)**

One of the shortcomings with most traditional white papers is their lack of either an executive or a concluding summary. This is due to several factors, including project budgets, a lack of creativity, or a false understanding of readers and their reading style.

Unfortunately, many white papers do not include summaries in their traditional text formats, or if they do, marketers fail to leverage their unique qualities in a way that will engage readers and draw them into the primary content. Many executive summaries are difficult to distinguish from formal introductions and appear to be repetitive to many readers. Concluding summaries, on the other hand, often comprise a simple ending that fails to impart key take away messages necessary for reader retention. In addition, since concluding summaries are often read first by the skim reader, many marketers who leave them out fail to engage the reader and thus never realize the opportunity to use these summary sections to make valuable first and last impressions.

## **The Lack of Graphics**

The intellectual that first coined the phrase “A picture is worth a thousand words” was clearly ahead of his time with regard to the issue of business communications.

One glaring mistake with the traditional all-text white paper is its lack of graphic elements such as business charts, illustrations, concept graphics, or workflow diagrams. The use of an illustration in a white paper means that a business reader can quickly assimilate the point, an important advantage with a time- and attention-challenged reading audience.

On the other hand, describing that same concept using several paragraphs or a page full of text requires more time and increases the opportunity to skim through that text. It also increases the chance that a short attention reader will become distracted by other stimuli or events around them. The greater the amount of required text, the lower the probability that the reader *will* read that text, grasp essential marketing messages, and take action such as making contact or passing along that white paper with a positive recommendation.

## **The (Text) Bottom Line**

If a white paper can't engage its readers during the initial reading and review process, those readers won't continue to read the subsequent pages and instead may be distracted by other commitments or consider other solutions that may meet their specific business needs.

While the traditional all-text white paper may still be an accepted document standard in government, academic, or scientific sectors, it no longer fits as a viable medium in an age of colorful, short, digital information commonly found in social media. As business users become accustomed to these new forms of media and communications, they will be less willing to read a text-only or text-heavy white paper.