



HOFFMAN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

**HOW TO WRITE A WHITE PAPER:  
A CLOSER LOOK AT  
WHITE PAPER DEFINITION**

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Because the term “white paper” means different things to different people, business professionals occasionally want to know how Hoffman defines this term. They often ask us simply, “What is a white paper?” The white paper format can be an effective way to educate potential customers on the merits of technology products and services and to explain the complex technologies involved. Although they are not the most exciting kind of collateral, white papers offer a benefit that more glamorous advertising and marketing materials cannot provide. To define white papers is to say that these documents provide useful information to the reader and lend validity to product claims—thus stimulating their further interest in the offering.

## ***What Is a White Paper?***

Hoffman’s definition of white papers is “a marketing/sales document that complements other marketing collateral by providing objective, useful information to a defined audience of prospective buyers about a particular business problem and potential solutions.” White papers offer meaning and unique value to potential customers by providing unbiased information and analysis regarding a business problem that they may be facing. Decision makers are more likely to read a high-quality white paper in detail than a brochure that simply pitches a product’s features and benefits, even if the white paper is several pages longer than the brochure. A well-written white paper that contains business-case information as well as technical material is likely to be disseminated within a company—sometimes beyond department borders—as different divisions enlist each other’s support for new initiatives.

## ***More on the Definition of White Papers***

More strategic uses and distribution methods exist for the white paper format than for other kinds of collateral because of the wealth of information they contain. White papers can:

**White papers can educate prospects, generate leads, reach a wide audience, and educate employees.**

- **Educate prospects before they talk to a salesperson.** White papers posted on a company’s Web site help prospects determine whether a product meets their needs before they talk to a sales representative; it’s easier to close a deal with an educated lead.
- **Generate new leads.** Companies can require that readers register (providing contact information) to receive a white paper. This practice delivers interested prospects directly to the sales force.
- **Reach a wide audience.** Publishing white papers at third-party information sites such as Bitpipe.com generates “mindshare” by making research and analysis widely available. In addition, it drives interested prospects to the company—prospects that might not otherwise have known that such an offering existed.
- **Educate employees.** High-quality white papers serve important educational functions within a company as well. They explain complex technologies in accessible prose, bringing non-technical employees (such as business executives) and new hires rapidly up to speed on the company’s competitive offerings. In addition, they can supplement sales guides with the real-world technical and business-case details that the sales force needs to effectively close deals.



**Effective Use of White Papers**

*White papers combine with brochures and data sheets to provide a comprehensive portfolio of collateral.*

### ***Common Objections to White Papers***

Some marketing departments shy away from writing white papers, despite the many benefits they offer. Common objections to white papers include the following:

- “White papers are not marketing collateral, so why should the marketing department be involved?” In the past, white papers were written by technical staff to explain the intricate details of new technologies to those charged with implementing them. But times have changed. According to some analysts, corporate decision makers rely on white papers more than almost any other source of information available to them. The solid technical information contained in such collateral helps decision makers understand the business case of the offering. This goal fits squarely in the bailiwick of marketing, not engineering.
- “What is a white paper going to do for me that our data sheets and product brochures don’t already provide?” White papers combine with well-meaning brochures and data sheets to provide a comprehensive portfolio of collateral. Product brochures generate interest in the offering. Data sheet specifications demonstrate that the offering can be integrated into a potential customer’s environment. But only the depth of detail available in a white paper can convince technical decision makers that the offering actually works.
- “White papers take forever to write. We need to go to market immediately.” It’s true that an effective white paper can take longer to write than some forms of collateral. But with a committed team of writers and content providers, a white paper in the proper format can be written, edited, illustrated, laid out, and distributed in as little time as four weeks.

### ***Defining Why White Papers Fail . . . and Succeed***

Some marketing and sales personnel view white papers as bafflingly complex documents that only engineers can understand. Sadly, this reputation isn’t entirely unearned. Some companies that recognize the potential benefits of white papers publish documents that create more marketing harm than good. Some white papers fail because they:

- ***Lack objectivity.*** Biased information alienates readers and instills doubt about the white paper’s validity. Instead of making

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unsubstantiated claims about a specific offering's suitability and benefits, a high-quality white paper educates the audience about solutions to their problems. Writers should cite outside sources such as analyst research or industry reports whenever possible to strengthen the credibility of the business case and to demonstrate the technical prowess of the offering.

- ***Provide inadequate or inappropriate technical detail.*** A white paper that glosses over the details of how an offering helps solve a business problem is little more than a lengthy brochure. By contrast, a document that focuses solely on technical detail without placing the offering in a larger business context fails to make a persuasive case. Effective white papers, by definition, explain innovative technologies in a compelling way that helps potential customers understand both how and why the offering will improve their business climate.
- ***Offer sub-par writing.*** An effective white paper clearly communicates a wealth of technical detail without condescending to the audience or making unreasonable assumptions about their prior knowledge. The communication skills needed to write white papers differ significantly from those required for marketing and advertising copy or for technical documents such as user manuals and training materials.

### ***How to Write a White Paper: The Team***

Writing a white paper can be challenging. An important first step is to clearly define the roles of the team members and achieve consensus on white paper goals and strategies. Here are some typical roles in a development team. The same person may assume more than one set of responsibilities—for example, the project manager may also be a content provider—but no roles should be omitted.

- ***Project manager.*** As in any development process, the project manager is the “glue” that holds the project together. The project manager’s responsibilities include setting the schedule; arranging meetings; locating and delivering background documents; coordinating document review, design, and production; helping resolve disputes amongst team members; and more.
- ***Technical and marketing content providers.*** Technical content providers should be willing to deliver existing documents (such as specifications or presentations), including internal documents,

***By hiring short-term contractors skilled in writing white papers, companies reap significant benefits.***

and should be available to answer questions that arise. Marketing content providers should be able to communicate key product messages as well as the business case for the product, including information about return on investment and other factors that influence decision makers. They also should submit existing marketing documents or collateral related to the product to ensure messaging consistency.

- ***Writer.*** A white paper is doomed to failure if the writer is not experienced at writing the concise, convincing prose that this unique document requires. Ideally, the writer of the white paper possesses exceptional writing skills, technical understanding, and marketing experience, as well as the ability to extract meaningful information from a variety of sources and translate it into coherent, compelling prose.
- ***Copy editor and proofreader.*** Skilled copy editors almost always improve a white paper. They do more than check spelling and punctuation. They point out flaws in logic, identify ineffectively developed concepts, and ensure clarity and continuity within the document.
- ***Illustration, design, and production staff.*** Visual appeal is as crucial for white papers as for any other marketing document. Effective white papers employ illustrations and diagrams that simplify and communicate complex information in a way that complements the text. The visual design of the document as a whole should accurately reflect the company's brand and image, and adhere to any existing guidelines. White paper format or "look and feel" is usually addressed by placing the text and illustrations in an existing white paper template that incorporates this brand and image.

Armed with an understanding of the purpose and definition of white papers, savvy marketing professionals are increasingly realizing that writing white papers requires skilled resources. Consequently, companies often outsource some of the responsibilities to skilled contractors. With the exception of marketing and technical content providers, outside personnel can effectively perform all of the roles described. By hiring short-term contractors skilled in writing white papers, companies reap the benefits of a highly qualified, dedicated professional

who can devote full-time resources to the project without increasing headcount or red tape. As a result, companies can rapidly write white papers that prove their products' technical validity and improve their chances for success.



**The White Paper Team**

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*Hoffman Marketing Communications, Inc., specializes in writing white papers for leading technology companies around the world. Since 1985, Hoffman has developed persuasive marketing collateral for more than 100 clients, including Symantec, SAP, HP, Adobe, and Sprint. In the last few years alone, the company has produced more than 100 business and technical white papers on a broad range of business issues and technology solutions. Hoffman's proven ability to develop the most difficult white papers distinguishes the company from its competitors, and positions its clients for success. For more information, visit [www.hoffmanmarcom.com](http://www.hoffmanmarcom.com).*

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