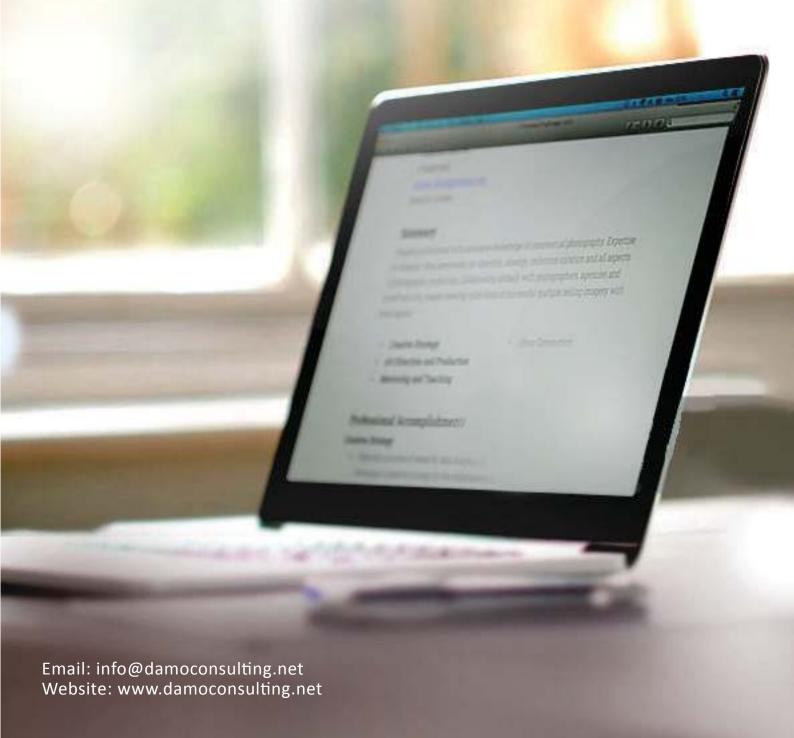# DEVELOPING GREAT WHITE PAPERS:
THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS

White papers are the preferred form of thought leadership content for B2B enterprises, especially technology firms. However, whitepapers are not equally effective for all firms. In this paper, we explore the five core tenets of white papers, the common challenges and pitfalls, and some practical tips on using white papers effectively in your content marketing strategy.

The HIMSS Survey of the state of content marketing for 2016[1] indicates that while 85% of healthcare B2B marketers have a content strategy, only 4% say they are extremely effective. An overwhelming 74% say they will be producing more content in 2016, at the same time, producing content consistently came out as the #1 challenge (41%). These findings are consistent with the findings of the Content Marketing Institute's survey[2] of B2B content marketing trends in 2016, indicating 86% of B2B marketers use content marketing strategies to grow their businesses.

One of the most important questions that a B2B digital marketer faces today is: what is the most effective form of content for my business?

In our work as digital strategists for B2B technology firms, we see a clear preference for the use of white papers among all other forms of written content. White papers, if done well, demonstrate thought leadership, drive engagement, and increase inbound interest. If done consistently over a long period of time, they can enable a firm to gain dominant mindshare with their audiences. A perfect example of this is the Content Marketing Institute[3], which has established itself as the preferred destination for thoughts and ideas on content marketing.

Another example is the IBM Big Data Analytics Hub[4], showcasing thought leadership in the form of a series of blogs by independent industry experts.

In practice, white papers are not equally effective for all enterprises. The best content projects involve detailed planning, a mutually agreed set of objectives and guidelines, and collaboration throughout the development process.

> " Good white papers depend on good planning. Otherwise, they can turn into a disorganized mess that will disappoint your readers and won't achieve your goals.
>
> **Shana Pearlman**,
> Content Marketing Manager,
> Mulesoft Inc

[1] Himss Media. (2016). The State of Content Marketing 2016. Retrieved from medtechmedia
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THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: MAKING SURE IT IS NOT A WHITE (PAPER) ELEPHANT

In the well-known parable, several blind men touch a large beast in different parts of its anatomy and are unable to agree on what the creature is. White papers often resemble this allegorical animal.

Here are a few reasons for this lack of agreement:

1. The definition

What exactly is a white paper? The Merriam-Webster[5] dictionary defines it as a "detailed, authoritative report." The operative word here is "authoritative." The writer has to demonstrate a degree of authority on the topic, something that is also referred to as "thought leadership." A disconnect arises when this mandate is hijacked to serve the immediate needs of sales – in other words, it becomes a sales brochure. In practice, this achieves the exact opposite of the stated needs.

2. The structure

How many words? Should there be an executive summary? Should we include a call to action (CTA)? How about a couple of case studies? While there are no right or wrong answers, the possible permutations and combinations of the answers to these questions explain the wide variation in the content we see out there.

3. The purpose

Whom are we targeting? What do we want them to take away from the white paper? Should we highlight key features of our platform/solution? Should we add why we are different from our competitors? Again, the possibilities are many. In fairness, there can be multiple legitimate approaches to a topic that are equally valid. For instance, a white paper on big data analytics can focus on Hadoop technology infrastructure if you are a hardware vendor, or on cognitive computing methods if you are a software vendor.

A white elephant is a useless or troublesome possession that is difficult to maintain or dispose of.

To avoid this fate, engage key stakeholders early, preferably in a formal discovery session, to understand program goals and objectives. Once there is clarity on this, develop a content calendar, specifically for thought leadership content, and obtain buy-in from all participants to commit to the milestones and deliverables. Key aspects to cover during this stage— ensure agreement on content review processes and cycles, align content development to the overall marketing campaign calendar, secure commitment on resource allocations, and clarify role assignments.

> " White papers provide tech marketers with a critical opportunity to demonstrate thought leadership and educate a nurturing market through company perspective/POV. Too often, they are mistaken as "sales tools," when in fact white papers can be so much more than a sales aid. In fact, you should be selling your white papers, and all of your content - as your payoff is reader mindshare vs. direct revenue. When a buyer, influencer, or decision maker trusts you, and you have earned their mindshare, then you can earn their business.
>
> **Nick Borth**, VP of Product Strategy & Marketing, Cloudmine Inc

[5] Merriam-Webster. white paper. Retrieved from Merriam-Webster
http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white%20paper

THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS OF WHITE PAPER DEVELOPMENT: THOU SHALT DO THE FOLLOWING

1. Identify the audience

Who is the audience for the white paper? List target markets and titles. The response to this question may suggest more than one version of the paper to ensure alignment with the target audience's areas of interest. For example, the CIO may be interested in the technology; the CFO may care only about the cost, benefits, or the ROI.

2. Come up with a great title

If real estate is all about "location, location, location," content is all about "title, title, title." The best titles pull the reader in. They are creative. They address a question, need, or sometimes fear that a reader may have. However, avoid "title-bait" – making a promise that is belied by the rest of the document. A common guideline is that titles should not be longer than 15 words. Make sure the key search term appears within the first 40 or 50 characters of the title. Since this is the most important aspect of the content, take the time to come up with the best possible title you can.

3. Build a great narrative

This is where you tell the story. This is where you decide how you want to communicate your message to your audience and in how many words you want to express it. In our work with clients, white papers have varied from 800 to 3000 words in length. 800 is on the shorter side, and we usually recommend no more than 1500 words. A balanced approach to developing a white paper would be to provide readers with new information or a differentiated point of view that educates and informs them, and including references to success stories and testimonials from clients or industry leaders.

4. Watch your tonality and style

This is not an admonishment. It is more a guideline to ensure that the tone of the content is consistent with the brand image and culture of your company. A Silicon Valley VC-funded startup has a very different tone from a traditional buttoned-down corporation. There are several online resources[6] that can help gain an appreciation of all the nuances on this topic. As a rule, avoid the three Cs — clichés, contractions, and colloquialisms. Work actively to avoid the bane of content writing – the passive voice.

5. Follow proper writing conventions

The best white papers have some common characteristics: They are written in a conversational style. They have short sentences. They avoid jargon. By default, use American English. It is a good idea to run a readability test such as Fletcher-Kincaid[7] to stay within desired readability levels. In writing the content, follow the Associated Press Stylebook[8] that's used by professional journalists and writers. Make sure any data points are referenced to recent and credible sources. Finally, make sure that you run a plagiarism check using one of the many available free and paid software such as Copyscape[9] or Grammarly[10].

Several online resources provide useful tips and templates for getting started on your white paper projects. You can download one of our templates[11] to get started on your white paper.

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[10] Grammarly. Retrieved from Grammarly
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http://www.damoconsulting.net/downloads/white-paper-briefing-template/

A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION

Content marketing and content development are ongoing processes. White papers are one aspect of an overall content marketing program. However, white papers can and should be written for multiple usages. For instance, white papers can be used to spin off a couple of blogs, a series of tweets, or an infographic. They should be periodically refreshed to include new information or updates based on new client cases studies and testimonials. White papers can become valuable corporate marketing assets with an indefinite shelf life.

In our experience, the most effective content marketing campaigns have been those with a clarity of objectives, a rigorous adherence to content standards, and compliance with an agreed editorial review process for content.

Given the short-term pressures on revenue generation at an enterprise level, content marketers often come under pressure to deliver immediate results.

> " White paper development requires industry knowledge and strategic thinking skills to appreciate how they fit into an overall content marketing strategy.
>
> **Eladio Alvarez**, SVP of Healthcare, Persistent Systems Inc

However, no single piece content can deliver immediate results. Content marketing is about long-term brand building as much as it is about near-term sales metrics. A research report in the MIT Sloan Management Review refers to the "Ladder of Participation"[12] that can provide guidance on converting readers.

Additional resources can be found online on proving content ROI[13].

B2B marketers encounter several common challenges in a white paper development program. These include a lack of executive sponsorship, lack of internal writing skills, and the involvement and participation of subject matter experts. In large organizations, a lack of alignment on content standards and multiple review cycles (especially for legal compliance) can be frustrating for marketers. These are much less pronounced in nimble and agile startups. Another big challenge is to sustain the effort and investment in a continued content development cycle.

We discuss these and other challenges in detail in our paper — Why B2B tech firms struggle with content marketing[14].

Great content is hard to produce. Whenever a company gets it right, it creates a significant competitive advantage and creates new revenue opportunities. Follow the five commandments and save your white papers from becoming white elephants.

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[12] Zalmanson, L., & Oestreicher-Singer, G. (2016, February 23). Turning Content Viewers Into Subscribers. MIT Sloan Management Review.

[13] Rampton, J. (2016, January 5). How to Prove Content Marketing ROI. Retrieved from ClearVoice https://www.clearvoice.com/prove-content-marketing-roi/

[14] Padmanabhan, P. (2016). Why B2B Technology Companies Struggle with Content Marketing. Damo Consulting.

ABOUT DAMO CONSULTING

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