

THE WHITE PAPER:

A Marketing "No-Spin" Zone

We are pleased to welcome Margy Rockwood as our guest blogger this week. Margy is a writer and the owner of RockwoodWrites, LLC where she carries special subject expertise in the medical field. We enjoyed her take on how to keep the white paper compelling in today's world.

Back before people committed their evening hours to NCIS and Game of Thrones, they read white papers instead. Okay, that may not be *entirely* accurate, but let's just say once upon a time people expected lower entertainment value from their activities, including their take-home business reading -- like white papers.

Today's demand for information, served up in bite-sized nuggets has palpably changed our learning style. Accordingly, white papers have morphed from the dry, government-issue monographs of the past to shorter, Letterman-style Top Ten lists or even splashy multimedia bulletins. Real reading is often considered simply too cumbersome and "DIY" for our schedules... and our temperament.

White papers had to evolve, but while more white papers are being pumped out than ever, as a source of truth, they are an endangered species.

Exacerbating the demise of quality product literature is the fact that companies' permissible time frame from discovery or invention to market is now under one nanosecond. (This is, of course, once the interminable regulatory hurdles have been cleared.) Peer-reviewed, double-blind, controlled studies may still reign supreme in this field, but you are not spared the pressures bearing down on all businesses to produce - *now* - or perish. The dark side of the new agility imperative is that, like a vise, it is a squeezing the tunnel from market testing to sales. As a result, the quality of the marketing collateral often suffers.

The danger in all this is that white papers are losing their identity, and in the process, their value. It matters because most serious customers still consider white papers to be the last vestiges of credible marketing. Lose this, and all is blatant advertising.

Is there a way to keep white papers sacred in a digital universe teeming with rubbish... while not losing our harried audience?

Consider these tips for producing authentic white papers that will thrive in today's spin culture.

Cut the lingo

Talk to them! And not in sound bites or business speak. Ban terms like "doubling down", "branding" and above all, "transparency," from your vocabulary. In most businesses, where ethics are suspected to be a secondary consideration, a word like "transparency" has become just another PR line that has employees smirking in their cubicles.

Be fresh and original. Make your message timely, not trendy.

Be honest



Let your marketing people work their magic in promoting your white paper, but keep the white paper itself pure as the driven snow. Your brochures, web content, case studies and articles may include promotional elements, but a white paper should broadcast the message that you have questioned, researched, studied and concluded -- not dreamed up, crafted, spun and run the metrics.

A friend of mine and I debate which is more valuable - honesty or kindness. I firmly defend the supremacy of honesty. Kindness, I argue, is easier, and has a self-serving element. After all, we don't risk any negative reactions when we are kind. Honesty, I claim, channeling Billy Joel, is "hardly ever heard" and indeed, mostly what we need.

The white paper is the rare genre in which raw honesty is called for and fully appreciated.

Keep it succinct

Remind yourself that what is interesting to you may be just time-consuming to the reader. Use all the tricks of the trade to stay concise. For example, if you can find the right noun, you don't need adjectives. Instead of "a long, arduous process," substitute "an ordeal" and save ink. Prune your paper, or if necessary take a scythe to it, painful as this is. Don't leave a skeleton, but close.

Engage the reader as a colleague

My college sophomore son complains that whenever adults ask him about his major they pivot immediately to what their college-aged kids are doing. We are such poor listeners, always trapped in our truth, our sphere of interest.

A white paper is a thing of beauty when it purposely engages the reader, inviting participation. Most white papers should be less about self-promotion than about teaming up to solve problems. As a reader and colleague, don't you want to be invited into the discussion?

Make your arguments with both compelling data and solid reasoning

Good research data is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an effective white paper, particularly today, when a) you can find statistics to back up anything and b) thinking people are wary of being led into yet another correlation = causation trap. Your arguments should be logical and where there are holes, acknowledge them. Few cases are completely airtight, and everyone gets that.

Remember, it's all about relationship

As you know well, success in a complex industry isn't achieved by using slick marketing ploys to pull prospects through the sales funnel. It is found through relationship-building. And trust, of course, is the keystone of a relationship. Customers would much rather work with a company that is intelligently ferreting out solutions to their complex problems than making big claims that they have found the one best solution. White papers are a way for you to express where you are on that continuum.

Formulaic white papers, with their calculated graphic-to-print ratios, may allow a reader to glean specific stats they need. But this data collection doesn't build relationship. What makes a white paper memorable is a sense of authorship by human beings, and that can only be related through the use of interesting language, metaphor, and an earnest grappling with problems, one that goes beyond buzzwords and colorful graphics.

White papers offer the rare opportunity to blend business interest with human interest, to invite collaboration, to share the gift of your ingenuous and ingenious ponderings and discoveries with others. Don't squander this opportunity by turning your white papers into hype. Instead, use them to build trust and relationship.

If you follow these tips, be on guard for 10 PM phone calls from prospects who find your paper more compelling than GOT's Tyrion defending King's Landing from Stannis or the burning question of whether Jethro will be sporting a center part in tonight's NCIS. And if they miss a Trump-Clinton debate while poring over your work, you'll really know you've arrived!

Margy Rockwood is an outsource writer of white papers, web content, newsletters and marketing materials for businesses in the medical, manufacturing, engineering, HR, C-suite leadership, real estate, finance and senior care arenas. Clients include 3M, DHL, Ashland Chemical and GE and many smaller organizations.

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