

# Why Channel Companies Should Market with White Papers & How They Can

*By John Burnell*

In the 18 years I've been preparing educational and marketing materials aimed at AIDC buyers, I've seen tremendous evolution in the technologies. The proprietary mobile computer operating systems and "handheld" bar code scanners only slightly smaller than a pickaxe that once defined the industry have given way to the sleeker, standardized and much more powerful products of today. However, one thing hasn't changed: AIDC VARs, systems integrators and other channel companies think they're too small or resource-strapped to market their businesses through white papers and related content.

Most AIDC channel companies feel they are not good candidates to benefit from white papers because of either the perceived effort and cost needed to develop them, and/or doubts about whether white papers are worth the effort. This article will explain why these assumptions are flawed. White papers are much more influential than most people realize, and are easy enough to produce so any VAR, integrator or consultant can use them to reach targeted prospects.

## Tech Buyers Respond to White Papers

White papers are an excellent business development resource for AIDC companies because they are especially influential to buyers of technology products and services. Numerous surveys and research studies have documented the white paper's role in influencing technology buyers. My firm specializes in white paper development, but even I was surprised by some of the findings. For example:

- 90% of executives said white papers are helpful or very helpful to their decision making, a Bitpipe survey found.
- White papers were the most-used source of information by technology buyers in 2007, followed by e-mail newsletters and trial software downloads, according to two separate studies conducted by TechTarget and MarketingSherpa/KnowledgeStorm.
- 71% of tech buyers use white papers, more than any other resource, according to the MarketingSherpa and KnowledgeStorm study. For comparison, case studies were second at 67%. This is somewhat surprising, because case studies can be read much more quickly, and are considered by many marketers to be the most desirable form of content. White papers were used more than twice as often as corporate Webcasts (33%) and more than three times as much as blogs (20%).
- White papers were the only form of content that technology buyers passed along to others more than half of the time (MarketingSherpa/KnowledgeStorm). Tech buyers pass along the white

papers they download 57% of the time. This compares to 49% for product literature, 47% for case studies, 47% for analyst reports, and just 14% for Webcasts.

One of the great things about white papers is that they allow companies to position themselves as experts in a specific field, which helps level the field against larger competitors. For example, when a new bar code output technology was developed a few years ago, two separate clients asked us to develop educational white papers on the subject. One client was a five-person software development company, the other was a leading global bar code printer manufacturer. The smaller company's paper is currently the top-ranked result for a Google keyword search on the topic (out of more than 1.3 million results), and the manufacturer's paper is tenth.

Why don't more channel companies develop white papers? In my experience, it's not that they don't believe that white papers are useful, but because they doubt their abilities to produce them. This is another misperception that prevents companies from marketing themselves as effectively as they could.

## **You're Not Too Small, or Too Busy**

Companies that have been frustrated by weak results from press releases or by the challenge of getting customers to participate in case studies may figure white papers aren't worth the effort. White papers take longer to develop than case studies or press releases, and usually cost more too. However, they can be much more cost effective, and in some ways are easier to produce.

A key difference between white papers and case studies is that you control the content. Your employees have the industry, technology or service expertise that will be highlighted, so you don't have to rely on customers or vendor partners to provide contacts and information. The average white paper we produce is about three times longer than the average case study, yet we complete many more white papers each year. This is because of amount of control our clients have over the process -- we don't have to wait for their customers to give permission and approval, as is the case with case studies and press releases.

The biggest challenge many firms face is converting their expertise into useful, readable content. Often the technical staff has the best knowledge of the company's underlying technology and differentiation, while the sales and marketing staff has the best communications skills. Many projects have languished because the two groups have trouble finding common ground.

Market or product expertise can't be outsourced, but white paper development can. Professional writers and marcomm development firms can be very useful for turning a company's internal knowledge into a finished, lead-producing white paper. Many public relations agencies who help their clients with white papers outsource the writing because the content is so specialized. Vendor partners are another potential

resource. Their marketing departments may help you develop a white paper, or may even make some of their own content available to reuse.

## Extending Your Reach

Development is only part of the process. Distribution is essential making to a white paper effective. There are a variety of services that distribute white papers to targeted audiences for fees based on audience size, downloads generated or flat rates. Don't let these costs scare you away. Distribution services can be effective, but are not necessary. The software company previously referenced relied solely on its own Web site and e-mail newsletter to promote its white paper, which is #1 on Google. Another client distributes a minimum of 100 white papers per month strictly through its small sales force and at trade shows. The company doesn't even count or track the number of papers downloaded from its Web site (a big mistake, in my opinion).

Without using a distribution service, organizations can often develop a white paper for less than \$5,000 with outsourced writing and graphic design. That sum represents a significant marketing investment for many AIDC channel companies. See if your vendor partners offer co-op marketing funds that can be used for white paper development, or if they are willing to co-produce a paper and share costs. Of course, companies can always produce white papers in-house and avoid fees for research, writing and graphics. If you choose this option be sure to allow plenty of development time, because many people underestimate the time required to produce a white paper, or have trouble finding the time. A hybrid approach is to prepare a draft in house, then have an outside specialist edit it.

Before ruling out white papers because of their cost, consider their cost effectiveness. White papers take some dollars to develop, but take your marketing dollars farther than many more popular alternatives. Here's a comparison to newsletters, which are much more common and inexpensive to produce:

- Newsletters go to customers. White papers bring in new prospects.
- White papers can be repurposed as contributed articles, podcasts and more. Newsletters often created *from* repurposed content.
- Newsletters are often deleted the same day they're received. White papers are passed along more than any other resource.
- White papers live long and productive lives. An RFID white paper I wrote in 2003 still appears in the top 10 of Google searches on the topic. I recently attended a seminar where a consultant says he averages 50 new leads per week from a white paper he wrote more than five years ago.

This article highlighted the influence white papers have in technology purchase decisions and how AIDC channel companies can develop them. The next installment will cover how to write titles that get prospects' attention and content that holds it. If you don't want to wait, or would like to discuss other aspects of white paper marketing, feel free to contact me.

*John Burnell is principal of Burnell Reports, which develops customer education and marketing communication materials for technology companies. Burnell Reports has published more than 90 white papers and won numerous writing awards. Contact John at [john@burnell.com](mailto:john@burnell.com) or 216.571.2319, or visit [www.BurnellReports.com](http://www.BurnellReports.com) for more information.*

# Writing White Paper Copy That Converts

In my previous installment I covered the reasons AIDC companies should use white papers in their marketing (reason #1: technology buyers use white papers more than any other information source; reason #2: 90% of executives say white papers are helpful in decision making) and explained why VARs, integrators and other channel companies are not too small to develop their own content. This article focuses on how to write a quality, effective white paper.

White papers have something fundamentally in common with AIDC channel businesses: the most successful ones are focused. Like a business, a white paper can be focused on an industry, application or technology. You don't prospect to every business that owns a computer, neither should your white paper. Lack of focus is the second-most common problem I've seen in the hundreds of white papers I've reviewed for my work.

Companies developing their first white paper must be especially careful to maintain focus. After committing the time and resources to create a white paper, companies are often tempted to use it to address all their markets, services and technologies. This approach dilutes the paper -- and loses the reader. Pressure from sales, engineering or executive management to cover too many topics in a white paper is often a reflection of pent-up internal marketing demand. The solution may be to create multiple white papers that each address specific topics, or to develop a company capabilities brochure.

A broad approach can also reflect a basic misunderstanding of what a white paper is. At their best, white papers inform readers about a specific topic (e.g. a new technology, application or business process) in an objective, non-promotional way. They provide a platform to explain complex ideas and to establish your credibility on the subject. The long format and flexible length that white papers allow do not give you a license to lose focus or to use the paper to carry all your marketing messages. A white paper is not a brochure, nor is it the place to list all the software products, vendor partnerships, customer lists and other material that didn't fit into your brochure.

Focus alone won't make a white paper effective for producing leads. A well-focused paper that delivers specific information to a targeted audience can actually drive prospects away. Why? Because the content

delivers the wrong message. I've seen many papers where the content is accurate, but completely out of line with what the prospect wants and expects.

As I said earlier, lack of focus is only the *second* biggest problem with white papers. The more common, and much more serious problem is content that is too promotional. Excessive emphasis on a specific product or proprietary method or technology creates the impression that you offer a solution in search of a problem and don't understand the real business issues your prospects face.

Professionals commit time to read white papers because they want to be educated, not pitched. The biggest differences between white papers and other marketing content are their educational angle and objective tone. A certain amount of vendor promotion is expected and tolerated, but cross the line and you lose credibility. White papers will help you sell, but not by being promotional -- instead by establishing your credibility and expertise in a topic. I've had clients who were delighted with white papers in which their company was only named once -- and that was in the very last paragraph.

Maintaining credibility while still getting the marketing message across is one of the biggest challenges white paper writers face. There are specific guidelines and tricks that can be used, from the white paper title to the "about your company" boilerplate at the end, and all points in between. Here's a summary of the most important considerations:

**Titles focus the paper and the audience.** Establishing focus and credibility begins with the title. *How Common Platforms and Development Tools Save Time for Mobile Application Developers* will bring in more readers than *Windows Mobile is the Best Environment for Mobile Applications*. Note how the first title entices the reader with a business benefit (saving time) and defines who the reader should be (mobile developers). Don't overreach on the title, because the paper has to deliver. A survey of white paper readers found their greatest source of dissatisfaction is content that doesn't match the title.

**Acknowledge alternatives.** White papers are extremely effective for advocating one method or technology over another. Examples in the AIDC industry include papers that promote a specific RFID frequency, advocate imagers over laser scanners, or explain a technology-enabled new business process. White papers can focus solely on educating the reader about the favored technology, but are much more effective when they acknowledge alternatives and candidly describe the situations where each option is best suited. Readers know that no technology is best for everything; acknowledging so in your paper builds trust. Doing so takes a leap of faith, but will result in a more credible paper.

**Use third-party information.** Expect your readers to take what you write with a grain of salt. They may be more accepting of information from independent parties, like media and market research companies, so use

such content to your advantage. For example, which of the following sounds more credible and authoritative?

*Lots of companies are switching to new wireless computers to improve their business;*

or

*Early adopters have already installed 802.11n wireless networks in warehouses, and 23.2 percent of warehouse facilities will have 802.11n backbones by 2010, according to a study of 750 facility managers conducted by IT Research Corp. in May, 2008. These new networks are creating demand for compatible next-generation industrial mobile computers.*

You don't have to be a client of VDC, Gartner or other research and analyst firms to use some of their material in your publications -- if the information is included in a press release or publicly-accessible Web site, it's fair game. One caveat: tracking down supporting data can be extremely time consuming.

**Identify the right writer.** Even though white papers often cover technical topics, technical writers, engineers or in-house tech gurus are often not the best candidates to write them. That's because the paper needs to clearly present the business impact and benefits of technology. For example, a wireless networking specialist could describe how a new security encryption algorithm works. What the white paper really needs to do is to explain how the new method differs from what enterprises use today, and situations where it is called for (a good white paper will also present the areas where the new option is not needed -- an example of acknowledging the alternative). Salespeople are often very good at putting your services and technology into business context, and thus are good candidates to write white papers -- if they can make the time.

**Don't spend too much time telling people what they already know.** This is an often overlooked flaw common to many white papers. Here's an example of an offending phrase you might see:

*High fuel prices are forcing many trucking companies and delivery firms to find new ways to improve efficiency.*

The statement is accurate, and you probably wouldn't think twice if you read it. That's precisely the problem -- it doesn't make you think. There is a place for some general statements like this to establish credibility and rapport with the reader, but if you fill too much space with them, you'll lose the reader before you deliver your more important messages. In this example, trucking companies know they're feeling the pinch. What they want to know is how you can help.

Why do companies spend \$3,000 on thermal-transfer label printers and software instead of using a bar code font package on their office laser printer, or track assets with \$25 Wi-Fi tags instead of with a clipboard and checklist? Because someone explained to them why the technology options were ultimately more efficient and cost effective. The white paper is your chance to do that explaining -- for hundreds of prospects without having to meet with each one. The more you sharpen the white paper content, the more of these prospects will become customers.

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