

A White Paper on White Papers

Emerging Strategies for Delivering Traditional Content in New Media Channels

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INTRODUCTION

The white paper is the granddaddy of technology collateral—but that doesn't mean it can't change. In fact, it began changing long ago. And now it's our job to figure out where those changes will lead us. In Eccolo Media's **2008 survey of B2B technology purchasers**, respondents told us that white papers were more influential than any other type of collateral: of the 155 people we surveyed, only one thought that white papers weren't influential at all, while 44% found them at least "very influential."

That's some serious cachet. The white paper may have undergone fundamental changes in the past decade or so, but our research confirms that it's still an essential part of any collateral toolbox.

What You'll Find Inside

- **From TDM to BDM:** The migration and expansion of the white paper's main audience
- **From print to Web:** The white paper goes viral
- **From one-size-fits-all to à la carte:** The white paper goes modular
- **Best practices for better white papers**
- **Conclusion:** The white paper as user-generated experience

We've divided this paper into three major sections, each section highlighting the trends we've observed. Then, in our concluding section, we provide both final thoughts and a list of best practices for better white papers. Feel free to move ahead to whatever section you like by clicking the links below.

- **From TDM to BDM:** The migration and expansion of the white paper's main audience
- **From print to Web:** The white paper goes viral
- **From one-size-fits-all to à la carte:** The white paper goes modular
- **Best practices for better white papers**
- **Conclusion:** The white paper as user-generated experience

In our **survey**, we found that **purchasers almost always interact with your content before they interact with you**. In other words, your collateral needs to reflect the kind of relationship that a prospective customer will have with your company.

We believe that by delivering innovative, reader-friendly white papers that respect each customer's unique approach to exploring your content, you can create a more collaborative reading experience—one that responds to individual readers' growing desire for interactive, self-directed learning. And by producing white papers that respond to current trends and that respect individual preference, you'll create documents that are more satisfying to read—and more effective in driving sales.

FROM TDM TO BDM: THE MIGRATION AND EXPANSION OF THE WHITE PAPER'S MAIN AUDIENCE

In 1999 (the year that Eccolo Media was founded), the typical white paper spoke primarily to a technical audience. It was a fairly lengthy document—upwards of 10 pages, sometimes even 20—characterized by dense discussions of hardcore technology implementations. In most cases, the ideal reader was a technology decision maker (TDM) who was often less interested in business benefits than in solving implementation issues. And companies paid big bucks for third-party analysts to research, develop, and write these papers—often aiming for a style that might be called professorial.

But sometime in the early part of this decade, all of that began to change. In one enterprise after another, **IT departments began to figure more prominently in business strategy**.¹ As the Internet age moved from its infancy into post-dot-com-bubble maturity, IT was no longer a free-floating entity able to make unilateral purchasing decisions based largely on technical specifications. In short, IT decisions became business decisions.

To read more about how the Web has fundamentally changed how marketers distribute white papers—and how purchasers consume them—see the **next section**.

A recent **TechTarget and CMO Council survey** tells us that readers are most frequently disappointed in white papers that focus on product information rather than on objective discussions of technology.² As we pointed out in **our own recent survey report**, purchasers expect to get product information from a brochure or datasheet, not from a white paper. Marketers risk annoying their targets if white papers bug them with that same information.

Based on our experience, we can certainly validate that in the first few years of the 21st century, an increasing number of white papers began to be written primarily for a business decision maker (BDM) audience. Instead of a super-deep technology discussion, you started to see a greater emphasis on the business benefits associated with a particular technology. There was less of a focus on the “speeds and feeds” details of a company’s product offering and more of a focus on higher-level industry trends, thought leadership, and strategic value. The TDM audience is still there, to be sure. But the presence of a great many BDM readers means that the white paper must speak to a wider array of interests and to varying levels of technical expertise.

So in the last 10 years—especially in the last five—the white paper has evolved in tandem with the changing role of technology in the global enterprise. In the years to come, that trend will only become more pronounced: with more and more companies viewing their IT investments as key strategies for business growth, the white paper will continue to adapt to an expanding audience—and will focus even more intensely on the role that technology plays in ensuring business success.

FROM PRINT TO WEB: THE WHITE PAPER GOES VIRAL

A decade ago, marketers distributed white papers in hard copy, often with high-end bindings and glossy covers. Trouble was, you could keep track of how many copies you handed out, but you couldn’t gauge who actually read the thing. And you definitely couldn’t engage with a community of readers in any meaningful, ongoing, repeatable way. Each copy of your white paper walked away in the hands of just one person who may or may not have decided to share it with a few other people. And inevitably, the doc would end up in somebody’s trashcan in very short order, its lifespan determined by the whims of isolated, individual readers.

Well, the days of hard copy documents are numbered. According to **MarketingSherpa’s** annual *Business Technology Marketing Benchmark Guide 2008-09*, printed documents remain a vital part of many technology buyers’ media consumption habits, but online resources have become increasingly dominant.³ And in **our survey of technology purchasers**, over 70% of respondents said that they preferred to view white papers on their desktops instead of in print.

Digital collateral doesn’t simply eliminate the costs and hassles associated with printing. It also makes documents far easier to share. Our **survey** indicates that all content is increasingly viral these days, with 67% of respondents reporting that they shared white papers with colleagues. Of that number, 25% shared a white paper with five or more people.

For our thoughts on how to make traditional collateral assets reach multiple audiences more flexibly, see the **next section**.

1. Mary K. Pratt, “Line Between Business and IT Blurs,” *Computer World*, July 17, 2006.
2. *Technology Buying and Media Consumption Survey, Report 4*, p. 19, www.techtarget.com and www.cmocouncil.org.
3. *Business Technology Marketing Benchmark Guide 2008-09*, p. 44, www.marketingsherpa.com.

The great news here is that when you distribute a compelling white paper, you can be fairly certain that it will be passed on to others. The challenge, however, is that in a world where digital knowledge-sharing is so easy, the information landscape is more competitive than ever. Readers accustomed to browsing the Web expect to get the information they want in quick, meaningful chunks, with the option of taking a deeper dive if they have the time or the inclination. And if you force them to sit down and read an eight-page white paper when all they want is a particular paragraph, you might just have an annoyed customer on your hands.

The rise of digital collateral means that you don't have to deliver all of the same information in a single way to a monolithic audience. Instead, think of the white paper as a flexible delivery platform that enables readers to explore as far as their needs and interests dictate. With white papers becoming more digital and viral than ever, there's no need for these documents to mimic traditional print collateral in form and function. No—the digitization of white papers enables you to transform not just how they're delivered, but even how they're experienced by individual readers.

FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL TO À LA CARTE: THE WHITE PAPER GOES MODULAR

“Technology buyers are swamped with both inbound and sought-out information. Anything that helps them sift through it is valuable and appreciated. Anything that is more relevant immediately goes to the front of the line.”

—*MarketingSherpa Business Technology Marketing Benchmark 2008-09*, p. 39

There's an easy way to ensure that your white papers are flexible enough to be relevant to an ever-widening BDM audience without watering down your content. All you have to do is maximize one of the Web's oldest standbys, the hyperlink.

Are you making the business case for some kind of security service? Rather than go into a page-long description of the latest advancements in encryption, try linking to a deeper discussion on your website. Or link to a datasheet or a product brochure or a case study. Maybe your CTO can explain the nitty-gritty of SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) in a podcast. That way, your technophile readers can get their fix while your higher-level business audience can move right on to the cost benefits of enhanced security. We call this individualized approach “content *à la carte*.”

Rather than telling your audience what to consume, let them choose cafeteria-style. Maybe divide your white paper into three separate documents, all linked together, then let your audience choose where they'd like to start exploring. This modular

To read more about how you can create a fully linked collateral ecosystem, see our **Conclusion**.

Quick Tip

White papers require a lot of research, so don't let that research go to waste. When your writer engages in conversations with subject matter experts, record those calls and edit them into audio podcasts to help promote the finished piece.

approach to collateral delivery acknowledges a simple fact about your audience: many of them only want to pursue just one or two aspects of whatever you're discussing in your white paper. So instead of forcing them to interact with your collateral in a single prescribed way, make it easy for them to pursue only what they're looking for.

The modular approach works in the other direction, too: if a paragraph in your white paper speaks to a particularly potent business challenge, distribute that paragraph to your salespeople so that it can be included in sales decks, demo scripts, or emails. Post it to your blog, then link back to the white paper in full. Use it as the basis for a webinar. In other words, stop thinking of the white paper as an airtight entity that must be consumed in a particular way. Think of it instead as a succession of value-added copy blocks—thought-leadership nuggets that can be lifted wholesale from the white paper and repurposed for maximum sales enablement.

CONCLUSION: THE WHITE PAPER AS USER-GENERATED EXPERIENCE

We talk to a lot of our clients about the importance of maintaining a **collateral hierarchy**. It's important to know how each collateral piece fits into your overall mix—for instance, how a datasheet might inform a white paper, or how a brochure might inform a case study. Once you understand how it all hangs together, you can do more strategic planning and ensure that you get the most possible mileage out of every collateral asset you create.

Best practices for better white papers

- An expertly written white paper ensures top-of-mind awareness of your expertise and of your commitment to innovation. So **don't be too product-focused**—instead, deliver an objective discussion of emerging trends. Let your readers decide how they want to act on the information you've given them.
- **Briefer is better**, so long as you don't skimp on the quality of your content. Today's white paper should be a substantive yet lively document written in an approachable style so that you can court a busier, more easily distracted, more results-oriented audience.
- These days, white papers are primarily for BDMs—but that doesn't mean you have to ignore the IT crowd. **Enable your audience to take a deeper dive by linking to supporting documents such as datasheets**. That keeps your white papers relatively short and to-the-point for BDMs yet still engaging for TDMs.
- A compelling white paper requires a great deal of time and attention to plan and execute, so maximize the content you've created. **Extend your collateral in smaller "copy blocks"**—thought-leadership nuggets that can support sales presentations, blog posts, or webinars.

Think of your collateral mix as an ecosystem, with each element dependent on every other element. The objective is to create an easily navigable system of up-to-date content in which readers can migrate seamlessly from one piece of collateral to the next. Don't get stuck in the old mindset of handing someone a hard copy and letting them walk away. Instead, give them access to your thoroughly cross-linked content universe, where they can follow whatever trail their particular interests demand. Just as a salesperson can shift his or her strategy or approach depending on the customer, collateral should be flexible enough to engage with customers right where they are.

What we're proposing isn't user-generated content, but rather a user-generated experience. And it's the basis of what we call "MarCom 2.0"—a strategic, flexible, integrative approach to marketing communications that's informed by the evolving demands of your audience.

About Eccolo Media

Eccolo Media, Inc. is a marketing communications agency that specializes in content and collateral development for **technology companies**, offering industry leadership in understanding and **creating content that leverages both traditional and new media channels**.

Driven by a true passion for technology, Eccolo's **extensive and documented experience** has elevated its capabilities to the category of **content strategy**, providing a degree of operational expertise and strategic insight that delivers superior value to its clients.

In 2008, Eccolo Media was nationally certified as a Women's Business Enterprise by **ASTRA Women's Business Alliance**, a regional certifying partner of the **Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC)**. Founded in 1999, the company is headquartered in **San Francisco**, California, and serves clients throughout the United States. Visit Eccolo Media's website at www.eccolomedia.com.