KINGPIN

B2B Marketing



The future of whitepapers in technology marketing

WHICH WAY NOW FOR THE WHITEPAPER?

Content marketing remains high on marketers' agendas but in the age of content overload, increasing digitisation and decreasing attention spans where does this leave the role of the traditional whitepaper?

"Just as other media and content has adapted over the years to meet the needs and demands of a target audience, so too has the whitepaper."

Before the days of digital wizardry and social media, one of the main ways B2B brands delivered content was through the humble whitepaper. Traditionally, this took the form of report-based information and its purpose, not unlike modern-day content marketing, was to educate and provoke discussion. Primarily used as an awareness or brand positioning tool, whitepapers were mostly leveraged at the top end of the sales funnel where prospects could only access them from a brand's website after registering their details. This created huge lead generation opportunities and very quickly every B2B brand was dipping its toe in the whitepaper pool.

However, over the years, the digital boom combined with poor whitepaper content and execution has seen their popularity wane. Given the vast array of modern, tech-driven channels, there are some that perceive the whitepaper to be boring and outdated (its official definition as 'grey literature' being case in point). Where prospect attention spans are notoriously short in business and every brand is trying to cut through noise, why ask a prospect to trawl through a 20-page text-heavy document when they can watch a two-minute animated video?

On the flipside, however, there are the overzealous brands still pumping out a so-called whitepaper each month - with no strategy in place or, worse still, presenting nothing more than a dressed-up sales pitch.

The common issue with both of these instances is content overload. Whereas before whitepapers may have been one of the few ways to engage a B2B prospect, today's marketing arena is awash with collateral. As a result, the B2B buyer is bombarded with sales and marketing messages, and therefore guarded about giving away any kind of contact information in exchange for content in case of nuisance sales calls.

So where has this left the role of the whitepaper in today's marketing landscape? Is it still a relevant and valuable asset? And what does its future hold?

Evolution and adaptation

Just as other media and content has adapted over the years to meet the needs and demands of a target audience, so too has the whitepaper. "Video did not kill the radio star," points out James Foulkes, director and co-founder at Kingpin, "the two channels just learnt to work together." Foulkes explains this is exactly like the relationship between whitepapers and digital. New techniques and tools have meant the whitepaper has had to evolve, but there's still a place for it within the marketing mix. Some formats, for example, serve more effectively as bite-size content, whereas the strength of whitepapers lies in their ability to communicate deeper insight.



It's all about using the right content at the right time. And content marketing remains a top priority for brands – as demonstrated by the recent winners of B2B Marketing Awards 2014. Many of the winning case studies featured content marketing prominently throughout the campaigns – clearly it paid dividends.

These award-winning brands are not the only ones to place content high up on the marketing agenda. Seventy-one per cent of B2B marketers considered content marketing to be a critical activity according to B2B Marketing's 2014 Content Marketing Benchmark Report - up from 48 per cent in 2013. Significantly, where brands cited their biggest challenge as engaging the target audience - whitepapers were revealed as one of the top most engaging types of content and the content that generated the most leads.

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Empowering the B2B buyer

While there is the argument we're all drowning in a content deluge, whitepapers – along with other marketing collateral - are contributing to a more empowered B2B buyer. According to research conducted by Kingpin, B2B buyers consume an average of five pieces of content before they're ready to speak to a sales representative.

The fact is, while the whitepaper may have fallen out of fashion over recent years, if we go back to one of its main purposes – informing and educating – then it couldn't be more relevant in today's marketing landscape.

From a buyer's perspective, not only can the whitepaper deliver a richer and therefore more engaging viewpoint, but it can better support purchasing decisions by providing in-depth technical or financial information, fresh research and more comprehensive data. As more B2B buyers actively seek out the answers to their business problems before engaging with a company, whitepapers are an ideal tool to meet this need.

Lead generation tactics

One of the historic downfalls of the whitepaper has been the way some organisations have used it as a blatant sales message. This has proved damaging to brands and left prospects reluctant to give up their personal information to download something that may or may not be of value.

With lead generation already identified as one of the greatest strengths of whitepapers, and indeed an increasingly critical objective within sales and marketing teams, prospects need to view the exchange of their personal details for a whitepaper as a fair trade-off. Thankfully recent efforts are being made to address this challenge.

One of the ways this is happening, explains Foulkes, is by offering 'ungated' content. So the whitepaper, for example, is not kept behind a registration form but available to download straight away. This doesn't mean the end to lead generation – just a smarter way of gaining customer intelligence.



Assuming a prospect accepts a website's cookie terms, marketers can track which pieces of content that prospect engages with. When a prospect downloads a whitepaper without having to register first, a good rapport with the brand is immediately established as the prospect has received something of value up front. By leveraging retargeting tactics during subsequent touchpoint opportunities, brands can then request the prospect's contact details later. This information is far more likely to be offered at a later stage because prospects are already assured the relationship could be of value to them.

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Creating a conversation

Another relatively new way whitepaper value is being established is by a collaborative approach to content creation. Successful whitepapers are increasingly the result of a collaborative process by multiple subject experts as opposed to a single author. Each viewpoint adds deeper insight and credibility, as well as making the whitepaper more dynamic and engaging.

Ultimately, the topic has to resonate. B2B whitepapers have suffered a bad reputation in the past due to product-led and 'salesy' messaging. Nowadays smart organisations are presenting whitepapers with provocative, intelligent and credible topics to kick-start industry discussions and help build brand affinity. The topic of the whitepaper needs to be highly compelling to help achieve standout, but it also needs to be a good 'fit' with the brand concerned otherwise it will lack credibility. This demands a careful balance, particularly if a brand is using a whitepaper to position itself in new territory.

Strategy and integration

The key to ensuring whitepapers have resonance and relevance not only today but in the future is considering them as part of a solid content strategy. Within this there needs to be a clear understanding of the target audience's needs, sufficient planning and careful thought as to channel integration.

Brands will often go to great lengths to produce a whitepaper but if it's not marketed effectively, either no one will know it's there or else they will but they'll see no value in downloading it. Multi-channel marketing lends itself perfectly to whitepaper promotion – think blogs around the key topic, infographics capturing top stats, a microsite, videos of industry leaders discussing their challenges around the topic, tweets, telemarketing and so on. Combining different channels and formats helps to generate buzz around the whitepaper and drives greater engagement levels.



Foulkes reveals that he is increasingly seeing brands take this a step further. Instead of the whitepaper being just another piece of integrated content, its role is actually becoming a lot more important than this, underpinning an entire content strategy. This marks a shift because even where there might have previously been a content plan - in which the whitepaper was included - now the onus is on the whitepaper itself to lay the foundations for the entire strategy.

The whitepaper might not always have the same appeal as more contemporary formats such as social or some of the newer digital options, but its origins and longevity mean there's something quintessentially 'highbrow' about it.

It certainly doesn't show any sign of disappearing from the marketing landscape. On the contrary, it seems the current content-led climate is reviving this more traditional medium and playing to its strengths. A serious piece of collateral to deliver thought leadership and foster intellectual discussion, it continues to serve as an invaluable tool for brand positioning. The key to not only its continued relevance and survival but also its competitive advantage is, like all things in business, it must evolve quickly to meet demands and expectations.

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FIVE TOP TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE WHITEPAPERS

James Foulkes, director and co-founder at Kingpin, shares best practice advice on how to ensure whitepapers perform in a competitive B2B landscape



JAMES FOULKES
DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER
KINGPIN

1. Address an issue not a product.

Make the topic link to a real-world scenario that readers can identify with. The undercurrent can all be about a product but make the reader want to read on.

2. Make sure you have a strategy.

Look at your content strategy first and work out where a whitepaper fits. Once you understand what your target market requires (ideally research your audience first to identify relevant themes) then it's easy for you to commission a topic. Of course you should build this around your sales story but you need to make sure it will resonate with the target audience otherwise it's a waste of time and money.

3. Produce multiple pieces of content.

One whitepaper is never going to be enough but it is essential when aggregated with other messages. If you use it to set the scene, you can colour in and illustrate that topic with other more 'snackable' pieces of content for immediate effect or content themes that can follow from the original piece. This spreads your marketing budget further and also gives you more touchpoints that you can offer to prospects.

4. Involve your sales team.

Get sales engaged before you produce the whitepaper (and actually in your content strategy as a whole). If you produce a piece of content that they can use for deal support then you will find you can extract more ROI (or at least traceable ROI) from it as they will use it on prospects that they are engaged with to push them closer to a sale. If done well, I've seen this strengthen marketing and sales collaboration in an organisation.

5. Define what function you'd like your whitepaper to serve.

Is it thought leadership, lead generation, competitive positioning or something else? This will dictate the go-to-market, so don't always ask for names and registrations on your own site for every piece of content you produce. Ungated content can work because you can still target unregistered downloaders across the web through a variety of forms of re-marketing. This enables you to build a relationship before you drive them back to your site to ask for more information. We are in a relationship-building world and that's what most individuals expect.

About B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats. Its key products are:

- Online community
- Magazine
- Awards
- Research
- Reports
- Training
- Events
- Membership

For more information on any of these products or services go to b2bmarketing.net or call +44 (0) 20 7438 1370

About Kingpin

Kingpin is a London based B2B engagement agency, established in 1997. A media agnostic agency, delivering services through the line, ensuring the continuous flow of insight and engagement from target audiences for our clients, with a particular focus on delivering ROI. Kingpin delivers programmes on a local, regional and global level. Clients include Dell, Intel Security, Microsoft, salesforce.com, Sage and Amazon.

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