



How to Craft White Papers that Appeal to Busy Executive Readers

Six Techniques to Engage the Short-Attention-Span Decision Maker

Executive Summary

SITUATION:

Executive Workloads Growing, Attention Spans Shrinking

Business decision makers need to stay abreast of industry trends and the leading-edge solutions that give companies a competitive edge. And white papers provide that information in a convenient easily digested format. But executives find themselves shouldering increasing workloads, due in large part to shifting economic conditions and the demands of social media. In today's dynamic business environment, decision makers have less and less time and attention to read and comprehend complex documents like white papers.

PROBLEM:

Failing to Engage the Short-Attention-Span Reader

Presenting white paper content in long blocks of text forces readers to hunt for bottom-line, solution-advantage information buried in all that copy. A prospective reader seeking answers to business problems may decide it's not worth the time and attention. With so many critical demands on their time, overburdened executives often forward text-heavy white papers to lower-level subordinates – or simply ignore them and consider alternative solutions.

SOLUTION:

Six Formatting Elements Capture and Keep Executive Reader Attention

Deliver your white paper messages in a fashion that connects with time- and attention-challenged business readers. Use visual formatting cues to help readers quickly understand how your white paper content addresses their business problems. Highlighting key ideas with appealing formatting

elements not only helps grab attention on the initial scan, but also compels readers to advance to more complex layers of information. Six essential techniques help drive your messages home: executive summary, bulleted lists, callouts (or pull-quotes), shaded text boxes/tables, graphics/video, and a concluding summary.

RESULT:

Engaged Readers Understand Solution Messages and Respond

Make it easy for prospective readers to focus on the information that is most important to them. Concise message delivery through targeted formatting elements creates an incentive for a reader to uncover more detail in a white paper. When readers can quickly engage with white paper content, they are more likely to read an entire piece, comprehend key solution advantage messages and respond to calls to action. That means more qualified leads, and faster ROI from your white paper marketing initiatives.

Watch the Video Below to See How New Media is Changing the B2B White Paper



White papers must accommodate today's new media-oriented decision maker

Today's Business Environment Puts a Premium on Time and Attention

The old adage “time is money” is virtually meaningless in today’s dynamic business environment. Time is not merely equal to money in value. For many, time is more valuable than money, because the number of hours in a day is finite.

C-level executives spend an average of nearly 16 hours per week using the Internet, but a mere six hours reading newspapers or magazines.

SOURCE: “PREPARING FOR RECOVERY,” FORBES/GARTNER, JUNE 2009

Between conference calls, meetings, travel schedules, emails, text messages, social media updates, and expanding management responsibilities, executives are strapped for time to read complex documents like white papers.

Industry researcher Gartner, Inc., in partnership with Forbes, recently released results from a study of how C-level (CEOs, CIOs, CFOs, etc.) executives get information. Executives who participated in the study averaged 15.9 hours per week using the Internet (excluding email), 10.3 hours watching television – but just 6.1 hours reading newspapers and a mere 6.0 hours reading magazines

With such heavy demands on their time, many executives won’t take a second glance at a lengthy, text-heavy white paper. And that means lost opportunities to engage key decision makers with business solution messages.

Still, white papers can and do help marketers provide valuable business information, educate target markets and generate sales leads.

How C-level Executives Use Media to Find Information

Media	Hours Per Week	Most Important Source
Internet	15.9	60%
Television	10.3	5%
Radio	6.9	2%
Newspapers	6.1	15%
Trade Publications	n/a	9%
Magazines	6	6%

Source: “Preparing for Recovery,” Forbes/Gartner, June 2009

Short-attention-span decision makers read text-based information, and prefer the Internet delivery medium. White paper publishers can use the same visual techniques Internet publishers use to grab and maintain reader attention.

Even the busiest executive will find time to read a relevant, well-written report formatted to make it easy to scan, read and comprehend.

Delivering critical, value-oriented messages to today’s time- and attention-challenged business executives requires a new approach.

Comparing Writers and Readers: Serial Writing versus Layered Reading



Crafting white papers that appeal to today's overburdened executives starts with recognizing the critical differences in the processes writers use to write white papers, and those used by readers to read them.

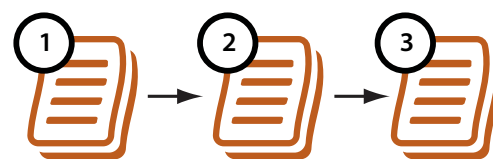
White paper writers most often develop information using a serial approach: The writer builds the case methodically and logically, page after page, from the introduction to the conclusion and summary.

White paper writers make the mistake of assuming that readers will read a paper in exactly the same order in which it was written.

The mistake these writers make is assuming that readers will read all the information in one pass, in exactly the same order in which it was written. In other words, writers assume that readers will read page 1 in its entirety, then read page 2 in its entirety before moving to page 3, and so on to the end.

This is not how the attention-challenged business reader consumes information.

The Serial Approach to Writing Business Documents



Writers write in a serial fashion and expect readers to follow the same approach.

Business readers address complex documents in layers. A white paper that grabs attention on the initial scan will be reviewed at least twice more, getting a little more time and attention with each pass. Visually guiding your readers to “rewards” of useful information gives them incentive to progress to deeper layers of engagement with your content.

Layer 1: The Skimming Layer

First, the business reader gives a white paper a quick scan with two key questions in mind:

- Will this information provide the answers I need to solve a business problem?
- Will reading this white paper be a good investment of my time?

This skim takes about a minute. Visual cues that highlight key points in the document help readers decide whether they will take time to read in more detail. Business graphics, quotes, tables, illustrations and formatted text help readers quickly engage with your content and continue to the next reading layer.

Layer 2: The Preliminary Reading Layer

Readers commonly devote 15 to 30 minutes to the preliminary reading layer. Rewarding your readers with informational elements in layer 1 encourages them to go deeper and seek additional meaning from surrounding content. For example, a reader who notices a graphic or chart may read the paragraphs placed before or after that visual piece of information. Readers who find answers to key questions or solutions to business challenges will advance to the third and final layer.

Layer 3: The Comprehensive Reading and Recommendation Layer

If the executive reader is fully engaged at this point, the chances that he or she will read the entire white

paper increase dramatically. A reader who does not find the material engaging – but still perceives value in it - might forward the white paper to a subordinate or another member of the decision-making team with a request to report back with comments and recommendations. This makes a call to action more difficult, because the key decision maker is removed from the process.

Today's Business Reader: The Layered Approach

Skimming – Under a Minute



Preliminary Reading – 15 to 30 Minutes



Comprehensive Reading & Recommendations – As Needed



Business readers devote an increasing amount of time as they find more valuable information.

Make it Easy for Readers to Find What They Need

If you do not provide essential attention-generating elements at the first skim layer, you're making it difficult for your readers to move on to layers 2 and 3. The typical business reader decides in about a minute whether a white paper is worth reading. A reader who does not become engaged during the initial skim may put the piece aside, forward it to a subordinate, or simply consider a competing solution.

Integrating visual elements within the three reading layers helps generate interest on the initial layer 1 review, giving the reader an incentive to advance to layers 2 and 3 and peruse a white paper in detail.

The Traditional White Paper Format Doesn't Work Anymore

Introduction

We often speak of our present period in history as The Information Age. Information systems and information technology have become the buzzwords of our times. We now have a system in place where time-sensitive information can be disseminated worldwide or accessed from across the globe in seconds.

Concentrating mainly on physical technology and various computer languages, one important component was apparently overlooked – the various human languages. What is the value of a global information system if it might not reach across that essential part of the user interface, a language the end user would understand?

A Need to Maximize Global Outreach

For those fortunate to be living in the Western Hemisphere, being fluent in English and Spanish would provide access to half the globe, with the exception of Brazil and Quebec and a few Caribbean islands.

In Europe, you can imagine most people feeling like they're fenced in their small portions of the continent, being unable to communicate with people beyond borders. The breakup of the Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact nations no longer set apart from the West presents our world with even more languages.

Whatever the continent, the global outreach possibilities of the Internet will never be fully realized with only the national languages spoken by people today.

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, it was assumed that peoples of the world would learn English or French as a second language. However this has not become as widespread as hoped for since the two languages are extremely complex in their structure and implementation.

Easy to Learn and Politically Correct to Implement

Over a hundred and thirty years ago, someone had a vision of developing a language that would break down barriers among different peoples of the world. It would be an easy to learn language, developed to provide consistency in its form and usage of the various parts of speech. A language developed that takes less than two years to learn to read, write and understand even by those who have no gift for languages.

This would not be a language that identifies with any nation or region, overcoming the reluctance of a people to want to learn another language. This makes for the political correctness of insisting a language for people of other nations to adopt. You would not be imposing your culture upon other peoples. Since you too had to learn this new language, you also would not be asking other people to do what you yourself didn't do.

This report examines present day difficulties of communication between peoples and nations, both on a personal level and by using information systems. Details on how a newly developed language would be the best option for enabling people of different nations to communicate effectively.

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Take a look at a traditional white paper—one published by a government entity or an academic or scientific researcher—and you'll most likely find:

- Too many pages
- Text-oriented design
- Paragraph-centric delivery
- Lack of executive and concluding summaries

This bland, text-heavy format is just not effective with today's time- and attention challenged executive reader.

Too Many Pages

The white paper has evolved from its origin as a government document in the 1920s. But the idea persists that a white paper must present

The problem with a linear, paragraph-centric approach is the assumption that the reader WILL read each paragraph, in the established order.

ALL the relevant data on an issue, along with the misconception that 'longer is better.' Given the demands on their attention, most executives do not have the time or patience to consume these massive documents. When confronted by a 20- to 50-page white paper, most quickly skim through it, send it to a subordinate for review, or toss it aside.

Text-Oriented Design

Back when the first white papers were published, incorporating pictures or illustrations was a difficult, manual procedure. This text-oriented format became an unwritten standard for the white paper medium. Even with personal computers that can easily incorporate text and graphics, many publishers of white papers continue to rely on the all-text format. Unfortunately, an all-text format forces the reader to wade through pages of information in detail to uncover bottom-line solution messages.

Paragraph-Centric Delivery

As far back as the stone tablet, humans have conveyed written information a linear fashion. So it stands to reason that this same orientation would apply to modern white papers. The problem with the linear, paragraph-centric approach is the assumption that the reader will read each paragraph, in the established order. A reader who doesn't follow that specific order, or skips pages, may miss key solution messages.



Lack of Executive and Concluding Summaries

Executive and concluding summaries can make valuable first impressions on prospective readers. Yet many marketers either do not include these sections, or fail to leverage their unique qualities in a way that will draw readers into the primary content. A weak executive summary is difficult to distinguish from a formal introduction and can appear repetitive. Concluding summaries often omit key take-away messages and calls to action.

It's Time For The White Paper Medium To Evolve

Any derby enthusiast will tell you it's difficult to turn a mule into a racehorse. The analogy certainly applies to traditional all-text white papers in the age of social media. White paper marketers who do what they've always done, sticking to the same tired, text-only format, are missing valuable opportunities to truly connect with their readers and influence C-level decision makers.

The 'Attention-Focused' White Paper: Six Elements Engage and Keep Executive Attention

White papers provide valuable business information in a convenient, easily consumed format. These documents assemble and organize complex, factual information, and educate readers using a step-by-step, problem-solution approach.

The test is getting time- and attention-challenged executive readers to the point where they desire to read an entire white paper. These days, we glance at headlines and rarely read entire articles, online or in print. We watch short news-bites on television rather than lengthy interviews. We tweet 140-character messages via Twitter rather than longer email messages.

For white paper marketers, gaining and keeping reader attention involves the same abbreviated delivery techniques used in today's news, entertainment, and social media environments. These media leverage a combination of formatted text, graphics, illustrations, charts, and video to convey essential information at a glance. This helps readers scan and evaluate competing messages so they can sort out what's useful to them and discard what isn't.

The right visual cues, used strategically, help win reader attention. Once you capture the executive reader's interest in your solution to a relevant business problem, he or she will commit more time and attention to your white paper and your solution.

Craft more engaging, attention-oriented white papers with these six formatting elements:

- Executive summary
- Callouts and pull-quotes
- Business and concept graphics and video
- Bulleted lists
- Shaded text boxes and tables
- Concluding summary



1. The executive summary provides a synopsis of an entire white paper on one concise page. An executive summary allows time- and attention-challenged executive readers to determine whether the white paper will be a good investment of time. The information in the executive summary should allow prospective readers to establish that the white paper offers solutions to their business challenges. A logical, well-written executive summary creates an incentive for readers to delve deeper into the white paper. An executive summary that identifies real business problems and proposes workable solutions gives readers the incentive to seek additional information within the white paper content.

2. Callouts and pull-quotes, set off as large text on a page, bring attention to key points in the content. As a focal point, a callout is often the first

A callout callout or pull-quote has a higher likelihood of being noticed and read, generating greater reader engagement.

thing on a page to attract reader attention. Callouts sit alone in open white space and most often use larger font sizes than the main text. As a graphic device used to emphasize certain information, a callout or pull-quote has a higher likelihood of being noticed and read, leading to greater reader engagement.

3. Graphics and video provide a visual means to help readers understand complex issues. Your white paper may have exceptionally well-crafted text, but writing style alone is not enough to engage today's readers, who simply do not spend a significant amount of time reading. Document design, concept/business graphics, illustrations, and video are the new requirements to gain readers' attention, draw them into the content, and enable them to assimilate your solution messages.

4. Bulleted lists enable readers to see and understand all the elements that make up a complex issue at a glance. Similar to the role of callouts, bullets attract reader attention by setting a section of text off from the surrounding copy. A list of

bulleted items can clearly be distinguished from the standard paragraphs presented on the page, making it a great way to highlight important information.

5. Shaded text boxes and tables highlight bottom-line, summary statements for readers. Shading one or more paragraphs of text distinguishes bottom-line statements from the remaining text on the page. If this technique is used appropriately, a skim reader quickly flipping through a white paper on a layer 1 review will stop and read the information within a shaded text box or a table.

6. The concluding summary provides essential take-away messages and a call to action. In fact, many readers review this section first. For the skim reader glancing through a white paper on initial review, the concluding summary provides a natural stopping point as the last page of the document. As a result, readers tend to spend more time on this page, making the concluding summary a valuable opportunity to gain and hold reader attention. A quick scan of the concluding summary should provide the reader a good understanding of how the solution presented in the white paper can solve their business problems. The concluding summary also helps persuade skim readers to advance to a more detailed reading layer.

The Bottom Line

The shrinking attention span of the business reader can be traced to increasing workloads and the popularity of social media for business communication. Adding attention-generating visual elements to your white paper helps your key marketing messages get noticed and read by your target business audience. Making it easy for short-attention-span readers to find essential solution messages that address their problems increases the probability that they will read the information, understand it and answer your calls to action.

The Attention-Focused White Paper for Today's Attention-Challenged Executive

Six essential formatting elements, used strategically, increase reader attention and engagement with your white paper content. Once you capture the executive reader's interest in your solution to a relevant business problem, he or she will commit more time and attention to your white paper and your solution.

The Advantages of a Project-Based L&D Consulting Framework

Concluding Summary

Maintaining a competitive edge in today's uncertain economic environment means that today's CLO must fit L&D initiatives into strict cost containment guidelines yet be equally or more effective in delivering high quality training programs.

To meet these high expectations, CLOs must leverage external service providers that employ a project-based approach to their L&D projects. Such resources must also provide an adequate level of flexibility and control that ensures today's CLO a measurable degree of success.

In summary, there are three bottom-line business advantages that enterprise CLOs gain by using Gravity Consultants project-based approach for their L&D initiatives:

- **Fitting Precise Expertise to Meet L&D Project Needs** – Because Gravity Consultants attracts the most qualified consulting talent, enterprise CLOs can choose the best fit to meet their challenging L&D project requirements.
- **Flexibility that Ensures Complete Control** – The customer is always in control at every stage of an L&D project from resource selection, to content development, and delivery deployment as the result of Gravity Consultants' flexible approach to project management.
- **Measurable Cost Effectiveness** – Because Gravity Consultants fully understands L&D project requirements from their inception, the assigned team of consultants and business development managers will get it right the first time without requiring additional cycles, thereby saving additional and expensive development and delivery costs.

For more information about Gravity Consultants project-based approach to L&D projects, please visit our website at www.gravityconsultants.com or contact us at 1-800-330-6558.

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Summaries

Bulleted Lists

Business/Concept Graphics

Gravity Consultants has been the leading provider of project-based L&D programs with an extensive network comprising thousands of highly qualified consultants.

Callouts/Pull Quotes

Shaded Text Boxes/Tables

Concluding Summary

Time is no longer a commodity – for many, time is so scarce that it is more valuable than money. A time-challenged executive considering your white paper thinks something like, “Is this resource worthy of my time? Will I find the answers I need, fast?”

In today’s demanding, time-compressed business environment, the probability is low that an executive decision maker will read a text-heavy white paper in order, in its entirety. To be effective, a white paper must quickly grab reader attention with highly pertinent information that answers core questions and offers solutions to business problems.

Motivate decision makers to read your white papers with six critical formatting elements that:

- **Increase Reader Attention** – Grab reader interest quickly; persuade time- and attention-challenged business executives to read your white paper.
- **Provide Concise Messaging** – Following the ‘short and succinct’ formula of other popular communication mediums, use the six delivery techniques to present key information highlights.
- **Ensures Rapid Message Assimilation** – Brief, impactful solution messages can be rapidly assimilated by today’s busy executive reader.
- **Creates an Incentive to Find More Detail** – Visual information cues engage attention, draw readers into more detailed information, and persuade busy decision makers that your critical solution messages are worth their time and attention.

Make your value-oriented messages connect with time- and attention-challenged business readers by delivering them in a way that addresses those needs. That means helping time-strapped readers quickly and easily see that your white paper provides a workable solution to a real business challenge. Generate better results from your content-marketing initiatives with compelling, attention-focused white papers.

Persuade busy decision makers to read your white papers with six essential formatting techniques:

- *Executive Summary*
- *Callouts/pull-quotes*
- *Bulleted lists*
- *Business graphics and video*
- *Shaded text boxes and tables*
- *Concluding Summary*



Own the Go-To Resource for Successful White Paper Marketers

We wrote the book on Short-Attention Marketing: This white paper is a preview of our book, *Crafting White Paper 2.0: Next-Generation Business Information for Today's Time- and*

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