



FIVE WAYS A SMALL BUSINESS CAN BENEFIT FROM WHITE PAPERS

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INTRODUCTION

Small businesses survive and thrive by being agile. It's a skill that has contributed to the reputation of these enterprises as dependable sources of innovation and jobs. Unfortunately, small businesses are not insulated from the impact of an economic downturn.

Confronted by the current economic recession, businesses of all sizes are exploring ways to streamline operations without sacrificing quality or losing market share. Understandably, the most notable have been the drastic reductions in personnel – changes that have resulted in immediate and significant ripple effects. However, business survival in a downsized economy also requires revised performance strategies in other areas including time and information management.

As a small business owner, I regard good information as a premium asset because it is critical for reliable business intelligence. Unfortunately, the growing array of communication media – online and offline – is creating an atmosphere of chronic information overload for everyone. Take, for example, the deluge of promotional materials.

As prospects for other businesses, small enterprises are targets of various marketing campaigns. Quite possibly, some of the marketing material provides opportunities for critical information gathering. Most likely, the bulk of the material falls into the nuisance category.

Unfortunately, to know what is worthwhile often requires sorting through large amounts of material that flood your inbox practically on a daily basis. It is a time-consuming endeavor. As all business operators know, time is a scarce resource. Frankly, sifting through a barrage of material in the hope of finding something that might be useful does not often translate into a productive use of time.

Fortunately, there are exceptions.

This report is about a type of marketing publication worthy of consideration by small business owners and operators. It is *the white paper* – sometimes referred to as *a guide* or *a special report*.

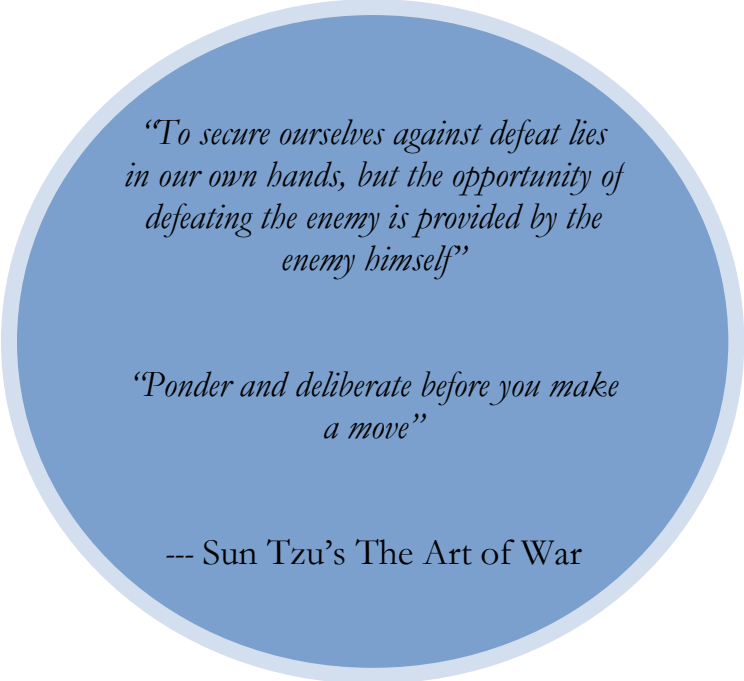
White papers bypass the sale-by-hype approach commonly adopted in traditional promotions. Well-written white papers focus primarily on educating the reader (the prospective customer). By discussing business benefits, white papers are potentially valuable information resource.

Small business owners can use white papers from reputable companies to gather information on vital aspects of their industry, such as

- The nature of industry competition
- Historical and emerging trends
- Market drivers
- Challenges within an industry and fact-based options
- Industry thought leaders, and more.

Well-written white papers are educational, objective, and presented in a format to help the reader make an informed decision about a product or service. The best part is that the information is free – and it is up to the reader to request a copy of the white paper.

Based on the premise that good information is an asset that yields valuable returns, this report examines five ways a small business owner/manager can optimize information gathering by using white papers. It is a tactical move.



“To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself”

“Ponder and deliberate before you make a move”

--- Sun Tzu's The Art of War

1. INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST.

It is understandable that you have questions about white papers, especially if you have never read one designed specifically as a marketing tool rather than as a technical manual. For example, you may wonder:

- Is there any advantage to getting information from white papers?
- Is the information reliable?
- Is it written for the “non-technical” reader?

The answer to these questions is YES, but ---

The key proviso is, *as long as the white papers are well written.*

Well-written white papers are good sources of reliable *pertinent* information about a particular industry, product and vendor. While a brochure might provide some product and vendor information, a white paper includes more depth and balance than do most marketing publications. Rather than simply focusing on the qualities and features of a product or service, a well-written white paper builds a case for the product or service.

In the process of developing a white paper, a lot of vital data is collected and synthesized into a handy format. It anticipates the type of questions a reader might have about a product or service, and provide

fact-based options. This explains why good white papers are reader-focused.

The fact that a white paper is typically less than 12 pages long makes reading one an excellent way to conduct focused research. This means that you can expand your knowledge base without spending an excessive amount of time gathering the information.

You can take advantage of the comparative data in the white paper to decide how well the product or service you are contemplating fits your business needs. You can base your decision on knowledge acquired relatively quickly from a reliable source -- without marketing hype or intimidation.

2. BENEFICIAL “SOFT SELL” APPROACH

White papers are one of the best ways for a prospective buyer to connect with the top vendors without having to endure the pressure inherent in a transaction process.

This is because reputable vendors who use marketing white papers understand that these documents are effective for “soft selling”. White papers are designed to give you, the reader, the time to examine the evidence (about trends, challenges, solutions, etc) without a sales representative hovering around you. White papers are designed to help prospective buyers “think through” the purchase decision.

How is this beneficial?

Simple – it gives you time to contemplate the purchase *at your own pace*. Having the time to gather pertinent information gives you the opportunity to manage the sales cycle favorably. You can influence the duration of the cycle and, possibly, the terms of the transaction.

In short, knowledge garnered from well-written white papers can improve your bargaining position. It can help you present your business as an informed buyer so that the best vendors will pay attention to you. This is a strategy that every small enterprise needs in an increasingly competitive business environment.

3. EFFICIENT COMPARISON SHOPPING

For some purchases like supplies and other business consumables, comparisons based solely on criteria such as price and delivery terms might suffice. In general, supplies account for a small portion of the operating expenses of most enterprises. Additionally, if necessary, switching suppliers is not a complicated decision.

However, minimalist comparisons might not suffice for purchases such as major business equipment and technology (hardware and software). Not only are these items relatively expensive, they also require some subject-matter expertise. Additionally, frequent upgrades in technology tend to push

demand on businesses. In those cases, ignorance and inexperience can become costly for the buyer – quickly.

It is critical that a small business positions itself to benefit from upgrades rather than be handicapped by technological change. This requires access to unbiased information beyond what is presented in a typical sales pitch or brochure. White papers can help you conduct helpful, in-depth comparison-shopping efficiently.

By reading white papers from the top vendors, you can compare products and services using criteria beyond price and delivery. A comprehensive view of offerings by top vendors, including compatibility, post-sale support, guarantee, repairs, and other criteria, will help determine the best fit for your business.

This type of information is particularly beneficial when shopping for newly introduced products or when approaching a new vendor. Possessing as much comparative information as possible puts the small business owner in a position to ask probing questions. It is an effective way to ensure that what you buy is what your business needs to operate successfully.

4. INFORMATION FOR BRAINSTORMING

Even if you are not actively shopping for a product or service, well-written white papers contain

pertinent information that can be useful for business brainstorming sessions. Most reputable vendors post multiple white papers on their websites for easy availability to existing and prospective customers.

While some vendors may require you to register, in general, it is a relatively easy process to download a white paper. This also makes it easy to share a copy with colleagues and staff.

The ease of access to and sharing of information makes white papers one of the best and inexpensive ways to create a culture of ongoing learning in your enterprise. Imagine how much faster it will be for your staff to grasp the core aspects of complex products and processes by reading an authoritative, up-to-date and succinct white paper that was written specifically for that purpose. The shared information becomes part of the knowledge base of the enterprise - an investment with potentially large returns.

5. GETTING THE RED CARPET TREATMENT

A white paper-based research could pay off when it comes time to make the purchase. It is true what they say: *knowledge is power*. By taking time to do a little research, using reliable information from well-written white papers, you distinguish your business as knowledgeable. It puts your small business in a

better position to negotiate and receive the superior service often reserved for large enterprises.

This may not be important in the case of a one-time purchase, or one that consumes a small amount of operating expenses. However, if post-sale support is an important concern, then it pays to enhance your business profile as an attractive client in order to ensure superior service. This could make the difference between a good purchase experience and one filled with regrets.

The great part is that vendors who use marketing white papers make it easy for you to use the process advantageously. Here is how it works.

If you registered your business before downloading a white paper, it is very likely that you will receive a follow-up email or telephone call from a sales representative. Depending on the vendor, the representative may actually be high-level sales personnel. When you are ready to buy, having the vendor's contact information handy allows you to take a decisive role in the negotiation. It allows you streamline the transaction with the best interest of your business as the primary factor.

CONCLUSION

The preceding identifies just five ways a small business owner can turn well-written white papers into potentially important information resource. The fact that these papers are easily accessible and

portable makes them an inexpensive way to create a culture of ongoing learning within an enterprise.

If you are contemplating the purchase of major business equipment, computer hardware and software, and related technology, consider doing the following to optimize your information gathering:

- Obtain one or more white papers (prepared by reputable vendors) on the product or service. An online search using any search engine, such as Google, is a good place to start.
- Circulate the document among staff involved in the decision making process.
- Brainstorm and gather as much information, including a list of questions to pose to the vendor's sales representative.
- Compare vendors and products before deciding.

Keep in mind that all successful transactions are the result of collaboration. With a little bit of focused research, a small business can enhance its profile as an attractive client and make vendors pay attention. The more prepared you are, the better the chances of negotiating a superior deal for your business. It is a tactical move. Well-written white papers can help.