



Ensuring That Your White Papers Appeal to Busy Executive Readers

Six Ways to Improve Your White Paper That Engage Today's Time- and Attention-Challenged Decision Makers

Executive Summary

SITUATION:

Executive Time and Attention for Reading Complex Information is Getting Shorter

Business executives know that white papers provide them with valuable information necessary to stay on top of industry trends and cutting-edge solutions that will keep both their companies and their positions competitive. But as personal workloads have increased amid changing economic conditions and new Social Media trends, the available time to read large, complex documents is getting shorter.

Unlike their predecessors who were accustomed to reading large volumes of information, today's business executives have far too many business commitments and time impediments that rob them of the dedicated time and attention they need for reading complex business information such as white papers.

PROBLEM:

Traditional Papers Are Ineffective at Engaging Readers with Short Attention Spans

Unfortunately, most traditional white papers require busy executives to dedicate a significant amount of their available time before they can uncover answers that address their business problems. The absence of key formatting elements such as summaries, bullets, sidebar callouts, and graphics requires them to

spend more time hunting for bottom-line, solution-advantage messages amid countless pages of text and data-heavy information.

Due to the demands on their time, many executives will either forward traditional 'text-heavy' white papers to lower-level subordinates in their organizations or pass on reading them altogether. Either way, use of these basic documents has impeded the efforts of white paper marketers to deliver essential solution messages quickly to their target audience, rendering them ineffective.

SOLUTION:

Adding Six Formatting Elements Can Enhance Executive Reader Attention

To engage today's time- and attention-challenged business executives, white papers must include six essential formatting elements that help engage time-sensitive readers with their content. Fully engaged readers will have a greater incentive to read larger amounts of detailed solution-oriented information that address their key business problems.

With these techniques, white paper marketers are more likely to engage business decision makers rather than have documents passed to lower-level subordinates, which can make the decision process lengthier or more difficult.

RESULT:

Engaged Readers Who Understand Solution Messages and Respond to "Calls to Action"

When readers quickly become engaged with white paper content, they more easily comprehend key solution advantage messages. This improves the odds of initiating a call-to-action response such as contacting the white paper sponsor or visiting their website.

For B2B marketers, adding six attention-generating techniques provides a superior way to track the effectiveness of white paper marketing programs and generate a faster ROI from white paper marketing investments.

Average Time Spent with Media

Media	C-Level	C-Level 1000+	Sr Mgmt.
Internet/Web	15	16	15
T.V.	8	9	8
Radio	5	8	5
Newspapers	5	6	5
Magazines	4	6	4

Source: GartnerG2/Insight Express January 2008

The low level of time executives spend with printed material is related to available time and attention

In Today's Business Environment, It's All About Time and Attention

Do you remember the old adage "time is money"? This statement is more applicable in today's business environment than ever before.

Not only has time become EQUAL to money, given the new expanding workloads of most full-time employees, time has actually become MORE valuable, because we have a finite amount of it. Our growing list of conference calls, meetings, travel schedules, emails, text messages, social media updates, and new work responsibilities must now fit into the fixed time frame of a 40-hour (or now 60-hour) workweek.

For busy executives, this increase in responsibilities has had a severe impact on the amount of time they can set aside to read complex information such as white papers. In fact, a recent study by industry researcher Gartner, Inc., showed that C-level executives (CEOs, CIOs, CFOs, etc.) spend an average of 15 hours per week using the Internet, eight hours watching TV, and five hours listening to the radio, but only five hours reading newspapers and a mere four hours reading magazines.¹

The primary challenge that many executives face is that the only way to maintain both their and their employers' competitive edge is to read competitive information delivered via white papers. While white papers are a great way to provide valuable business information, many are formatted in such a way that makes it difficult for time-challenged executives to read and comprehend.

Unfortunately, the traditional 10- to 20-page white paper that represented the gold standard only a few

years ago won't fit into today's time-constrained work schedule. Given the demands on their time, when executives see long white papers with several pages of unstructured text, many won't even bother to read them. When this occurs, the opportunity to engage key decision makers is lost.

To deliver critical messages to today's time- and attention-challenged business executives, a new approach is necessary. Information must be delivered using visual elements that will grab their attention and allow them to select the specific

C-level executives spend an average of 15 hours per week using the Internet, but a mere four hours reading books and magazines.

SOURCE: GARTNER, INC., JANUARY 2008

portions that are most important given the limited amount of time they have set aside for this task. Once they can determine that the white paper contains the type of valuable information they need, these executives can allocate the appropriate amount of time to read the paper in its entirety.

With the goal of engaging today's time-constrained business readers, business marketers can add six critical elements to their white papers that will not only help them make better connections with readers, but, more important, allow readers to decide how, when, and where to read them. By adding these visual and formatting elements, value-oriented white paper messages can be delivered in a more effective fashion that is best suited to address the needs of today's time- and attention-challenged business reader.

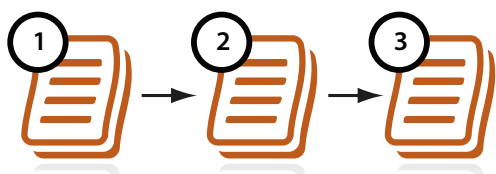
Comparing Writers and Readers: Serial Writing versus Layered Reading

To understand how the white paper medium must evolve to accommodate the needs of today's readers, it is important to understand the differences between the way writers write white papers and the process readers use to read them.

Writers assume that the reader WILL read all the information in the same order in which it was written.

White paper writers use what is referred to as a **serial** approach to develop information. In other words, the first page (usually an introduction) is written, then page 2, page 3, etc. Unfortunately, writers who use this approach assume that readers WILL read all the information in the same order in which it was written. In other words, writers assume that readers will read page 1 in its entirety BEFORE they read page 2, and page 2 in its entirety BEFORE page 3, etc. In reality, the reading process used by today's time- and attention-challenged business reader is very different from this serial approach.

The Serial Approach to Writing Business Documents



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

Instead of a serial reading method, business executives assimilate information by using what is referred to as a **layered** approach. Using this process, the reader reviews the white paper several times, for a longer period of time with each subsequent review, as long as engaging information can be uncovered. As these “rewards” are found after each pass or “layer,” the reader advances to the next reading level and devotes more time and attention to the content. This is what is commonly referred to as drawing the reader into the content, which is shown in the

illustration on the next page.

Here is an explanation of each of these review layers and how they relate to today's business reader:

Layer 1: The Skimming Layer

When business readers take their first look at a white paper, they quickly skim through the entire document page by page, looking for specific pieces of information that might be of interest to them.

This quick search is designed to answer two fundamental questions:

- Will this information provide valuable answers that can solve a business problem I am experiencing?
- Will this white paper be a good investment of my limited and important reading time?

During this first skim reading process, which usually takes about a minute, readers look for key elements such as business graphics, quotes, tables, illustrations, or other pieces of formatted text that will grab their attention and engage their interest in the paper's content. If they find one or more of these items, they will become more engaged with the content and will advance to the next reading level.

Layer 2: The Preliminary Reading Layer

Once readers have found rewarding informational elements in layer 1, they will devote more time to understanding their meaning. For example, if they notice a graphic or chart, they may read the paragraphs that are placed before or after that graphic or chart. They will often devote 15 to 30 minutes to this preliminary reading stage. If the information answers some of their key questions or seems to address current business needs, then they advance to the third and final layer.

Layer 3: The Comprehensive Reading and Recommendation Layer

Once rewarded with valuable information in layers 1 and 2, readers advance to the third and final layer and devote as much time as necessary to reading the entire white paper. If the reader (such as a C-level



executive) is engaged at this point, the chances that he or she will read the entire white paper increase dramatically. If the reader is not engaged or has not found pieces of valuable information, he or she might forward the white paper to a subordinate or another member of the decision-making team with a recommendation to report back with comments and/or opinions. This makes a call to action on the part of the key decision maker more difficult, because he or she is further removed from the process.

The Layered Approach with Today's Business Reader

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.

Integrating the Reading Layers

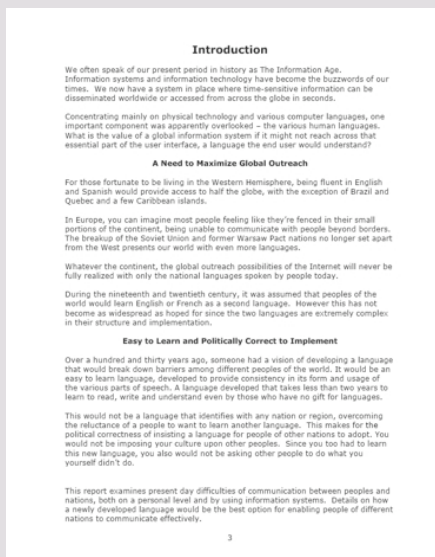
Using a serial writing process, most white papers assume that every reader will take a comprehensive approach and read the entire paper from start to finish. To get the attention of today's time- and attention-challenged business readers, white paper marketers must integrate within all three layers a variety of visual elements that will not only attract readers' attention, but also provide an incentive for them to read a greater portion of the white paper. This requires gaining their attention at both the skimming layer and the preliminary reading layer.

Unfortunately, many text-heavy white papers do not engage readers from the start, making it difficult for readers to move on to layers 2 and 3. When they are not provided with essential attention-generating elements at the first skim layer, business readers are less likely to become engaged with the content and will become more distracted by other office events or demands on their time. Even worse, they may be turned off by such documents and read other white papers that have elements to engage their interest, given their limited amount of time and attention.

Why the Traditional White Paper Format Won't Work Anymore

Take a look at a traditional white paper, such as one published by a government entity or an academic or scientific researcher. Most use a traditional format with one or more of the following attributes that are no longer effective with today's time- and attention-challenged executive reader:

- Long Pages
- Text-Oriented Design
- Paragraph-Centric Delivery Mechanism
- Lack of Summaries (Executive or Concluding)



Long Pages

As the white paper evolved from its origin as a government document in the 1920s, one attribute that has remained is its ability to present as much relevant data on an issue as possible. This strategy has resulted in the creation of large tomes of information, ranging in length from 10 to 50 pages.

Unfortunately, given the demands on their time and attention, most executives do not have the time necessary to read these large documents. When confronted by a 10- to 50-page white paper, most will quickly skim through it, or send it to a subordinate in their organization, or opt out of reading it altogether.

Text-Oriented Design

At the beginning of the 20th century, documents were produced using analog devices such as pens and typewriters that made the process of incorporating pictures or illustrations very difficult. As white papers became more popular, this text-oriented format became an unwritten standard that was associated with the entire medium.

After many decades, even with the advent of personal computers that can easily incorporate text and graphics, most white papers continued to use an all-text format as the only means of delivering critical business information. As a result, many organizations still feel that the text-oriented design is the best format to use when producing a white paper. Unfortunately, an all-text format makes rapid reader engagement more difficult, since large portions of information must be read to uncover bottom-line solution messages. Today's time- and attention-challenged business executives simply don't have the time their previous counterparts had for this task.

Paragraph-Centric Delivery Mechanism

As far back as the stone tablet, mankind has produced information on a line-by-line or paragraph-by-paragraph basis for every form of communication. For modern white papers, it stands to reason that this same orientation would be applied.

The problem with the paragraph-centric approach is the assumption that the reader WILL read each paragraph in an established order to understand the key messages in the paper. If the reader doesn't follow that specific order, or skips ahead to another page, key messages that the author intended to be read may be missed.

The problem with the paragraph-centric approach is the assumption that the reader WILL read each paragraph in an established order to understand key messages.

The paragraph approach used by most traditional white papers also assumes that readers have lots of time on their hands to read each and every paragraph until the entire white paper has been completed. With the limited amount of time available for reading in today's demanding business environment, the probability that an executive decision maker will read an entire traditional 'text-heavy' white paper is low.

Lack of Summaries (Executive or Concluding)

One of the shortcomings in most traditional white papers is their lack of either an executive or a concluding summary. This is due to several factors, including project budgets, a lack of creativity, or a false understanding of readers and their reading style.

Unfortunately, many white papers do not include summaries in their traditional text formats, or, if they do, marketers fail to leverage their unique qualities in a way that will engage readers and draw them into the primary content. Many executive summaries are difficult to distinguish from formal introductions and appear repetitive to many readers. Concluding summaries, on the other hand, comprise a simple ending that fails to impart key walk-away messages necessary for reader retention. In addition, since concluding summaries are often read first by the skim reader, many marketers miss the opportunity to use these sections to make valuable first impressions.



The Bottom Line

Any derby enthusiast will tell you that it's difficult to turn a mule into a racehorse. This analogy certainly applies to traditional all-text white papers in the age of social media, where short, brief messages have become the standard.

Unfortunately, many traditional business white papers do not take cues from either magazines or the web, where a combination of highly formatted text, graphic illustration, and charts is the standard means of quickly delivering essential business information. By using a traditional text format, many white paper marketers fail to make connections with their readers and, in turn, are unable to influence key C-level decision makers.

Today's white papers must quickly grab reader attention with highly pertinent information that answers core questions designed to solve existing business problems. If a white paper can't engage the reader during their initial skim review process, they won't remain with the document as a comprehensive reader. When this occurs, they will become more distracted by other business commitments, or consider another solution altogether.

The 'Attention-Focused' White Paper: Six Elements That Increase Executive Attention

White papers provide valuable business information that executive decision makers are unable to find with any other business communication medium.

These documents are unique in the way that they

leverage factual information to educate readers using a step-by-step problem- and solution-oriented approach.

But getting readers to the point where they desire to read an entire white paper is a significant challenge, given the demands on their time and attention.

Today, readers must

first determine if a white paper is worth reading before they will invest their valuable time with it. Once their attention and interest have been gained, they will devote as much time as necessary to read the entire white paper. Of course, how to get the reader to that point is, as they say, the \$64,000 question.

Gaining greater reader attention involves the use of abbreviated delivery techniques that are popular in today's news, entertainment, and social media environments. For example, we no longer read newspaper articles, we glance at headlines. We watch short sound bites on television rather than lengthy interviews. We send short tweets via Twitter rather than long email messages.

To gain the attention of today's time- and attention-challenged business reader, six essential elements must be added to white papers in order to transform them into engaging attention-oriented communications. Together, these six elements

become a highly effective way to encourage executive decision makers to read more complex educational white paper content. These six elements are:

- The Executive Summary
- The Concluding Summary
- Callouts/Pull Quotes
- Business and Concept Graphics
- Bullet Lists
- Shaded Text Boxes

1. The executive summary provides a synopsis of an entire white paper within 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 their limited and valuable time. More important, the information contained in the executive summary should allow readers to determine if the white paper will meet their existing business needs.

Contrary to a commonly held theory, executive summaries do not dissuade readers from reading the primary sections of white papers. Instead, a logically produced and well-written executive summary creates an incentive for readers to read a greater portion of the white paper. If the executive summary accurately identifies current business problems, the reader will have a greater incentive to seek additional information to solve them. Under these circumstances, they will be naturally inclined to read the remaining portions of the white paper content.

2. The concluding summary provides essential walk-away messages after the white paper has been read. For the skim reader who glances through a white paper during his/her first review, the concluding summary provides a natural stopping point, since it is the last page of the document. As a result, readers tend to spend more time on this page, creating a valuable opportunity to gain greater reader attention. The concluding summary also increases the possibility that skim readers will



Callouts are often one of the first things noticed on any page of a white paper, because the text sits alone in the open white space of the sidebar margins.

advance to a more detailed reading stage, where they can determine the validity of the solution advocated in the white paper.

3. Callouts/pull quotes are the single most important point on any particular page. Callouts are often one of the first things noticed on any page of a white paper. In part, callouts are noticed because the text sits alone in an open white space within the sidebar margins. On another level, callouts often use larger font sizes than the main text, which means they have a higher likelihood of being noticed and read, leading to greater reader engagement.

4. Graphics provide a way to understand complex issues via illustrations and visualization. While your white paper may have exceptionally worded text, writing style alone is not enough to engage today's readers, since most do not spend a significant amount of time reading. Today, elements such as document design, concept/business graphics, and illustrations are the new requirements to gain reader attention, draw them into the content, and enable them to assimilate critical business messages.

5. Bullet lists enable readers to see and understand all the elements that make up a complex issue. Similar to the role of callouts in the sidebar,

bullets are another effective way of gaining reader attention. A list of bulleted items can clearly be distinguished from the standard paragraphs presented on the page. When readers see a list of bullets, their attention is instinctively drawn to that list, making it a great way to highlight important information. It is also an excellent way to deliver information, given the limited amount of time and attention with today's busy business readers.

6. Shaded text boxes provide readers with bottom-line summary statements. Shading one or more paragraphs of text is an effective way of distinguishing bottom-line statements from the remaining text on the page. It is also effective with skim readers, who quickly flip through the white paper upon initial review. In this situation, a large shaded area will have a greater chance of being noticed than a portion of bold or italicized text. If this technique is used appropriately, a skim reader will stop and read the information that is contained within these text boxes.

Using as many of these six elements as possible within a white paper facilitates the marketer's delivery of essential solution messages to the target audience.

The Bottom Line

By making essential solution messages more easily seen, marketers increase the probability that they will be read and understood. With attention spans getting shorter as the result of growing workloads and the popularity of Social Media, adding attention-generating elements to your white paper ensures that your key marketing messages will have the best opportunity to be noticed, read, and acted on by your target business audience.

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

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

Summaries

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.

Clarity Consultants has been the leading provider of project-based L&D programs for over 16 years with an extensive network comprising thousands of highly qualified consultants that satisfies the needs of any enterprise training project.

Shaded Text

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

Bullets

- **Fitting Precise Expertise to Meet L&D Project Needs** – Because Clarity 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 Clarity Consultants' flexible approach to project management.
- **Measurable Cost Effectiveness** – Because Clarity 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 Clarity's project-based approach to L&D projects, please visit the Clarity Consultants website at www.clarityconsultants.com or contact us at 1-800-330-6558.



Graphics

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

Sidebar Callouts

Adding several visual elements increase reader attention and engagement with the white paper content.

Concluding Summary

Time has now become a more important commodity than money. When it comes to reading white papers, many executives ask themselves, "Will this resource provide me with the answers I seek in the time I can invest in it?" If answers to questions can be quickly uncovered, today's busy executives will invest a significant portion of their valuable and limited time in reading your white paper and seriously considering the solution that it advocates.

Most traditional text-oriented white papers do not format their information in a way that makes this process easy for today's time- and attention-challenged business executives. To gain their attention, use six critical visual elements to further draw them into more detailed information.

In summary, using six key attention-generating white paper elements provides the following advantages for white paper marketers to attract today's executive reader:

- **Increases Reader Attention** – The addition of six attention-generating elements is an excellent way to grab reader attention and deliver essential solution messages for today's time- and attention-challenged business executives.
- **Provides Concise Messaging** – Only a limited amount of information can be presented within any of the six delivery techniques, following the successful 'short and succinct' formula of other popular communication mediums.
- **Ensures Rapid Message Assimilation** – By using these six attention-generating elements, you can deliver brief solution messages, ensuring that critical information can be rapidly delivered and assimilated by today's busy executive reader.
- **Creates an Incentive to Find More Detail** – Using these six attention-generating elements engages reader attention, drawing them into more detailed information, where critical solution messages of greater length can be delivered.

For more information on how you can use attention-generating marketing techniques in your white papers, please subscribe to the free monthly newsletter "Short Attention Marketing Tips" or visit the White Paper Pundit blog at www.whitepaperpundit.com.

Using six critical visual white paper elements increases executive attention, thereby drawing them into more detailed information.

We Wrote the Book on Short-Attention Marketing

This white paper is preview of an upcoming book titled *Crafting White Paper 2.0: Next-Generation Business Information for Today's Time- and Attention-Challenged Decision Makers*, which will be available in fall 2009.

For more information, please visit the Appum Group website at www.whitepapercompany.com.

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Visit www.whitepapercompany.com to find out more about how The Appum Group can help you generate better results from your marketing communications with effective, 'attention-focused' white papers.

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