



Lead generation via white papers

Winning customers through valuable content

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While classical marketing goals such as awareness building and brand promotion do still have their place, they are increasingly assuming a background role. More and more, the efficiency of marketing activities is now linked to hard sales targets. Lead generation has proved an ideal tool to achieve these targets and produce measurable success.

Today, lead generation is widely regarded as a perfect way to

- find a direct route to potential customers,
- define a direct return on investment for marketing activities, and
- promote stronger cooperation between marketing and sales departments.

White papers are the most important lead generation tool to stimulate the interest of target groups and establish an ongoing dialogue with them.

1. Lead generation within the marketing mix

What is the best way of establishing a lasting relationship between a company's products and its potential buyers?

In the business-to-business world, products tend to be highly sophisticated and complex, and require explanation. It is not uncommon that potential customers must first gain sufficient understanding of the problem a certain product actually solves, before they can begin to appreciate the product's qualities. Therefore, the challenge in terms of marketing is to get the target group to take a detailed, comprehensive look at these products.

Advertising campaigns are only the second best way of doing this. The extensive communication effort needed in order to market products requires opportunities to start a dialogue with the target group. For this reason, trade fairs and road shows, and increasingly also webcasts and webinars, are very popular ways of generating product leads in the B2B arena.

Generating leads via white papers is by far more cost effective than events and web casts. Following its success in the US, this approach is now gaining acceptance in the German-speaking countries area as well. It offers a highly accurate opportunity to approach high-class target groups.

2. About white papers

2.1 What is a white paper?

A white paper is a document that competently explains a specific subject matter with as little vendor bias as possible. Unlike scientific papers, however, white papers are not intended for a narrow audience of experts. They aim to use easily understandable language to convey knowledge that is relevant for a specific target group's work.

A white paper is not an advertising brochure. Its tone and choice of vocabulary are very objective; there is no room for advertising slogans or marketing slang in a white paper..

Generally, white papers can be

- descriptions of technical processes,
- descriptions of technical problems and outlines of their potential solutions,
- descriptions of strategies in order to achieve a specific aim,
- case studies and examples of use,
- market surveys,
- or any combination of these components.

Essential in any case is that the target group must be able to derive tangible practical benefit from reading a white paper.

The length of a white paper is determined by the intended purpose and by the information requirements of the white paper's intended target group. It usually ranges between 6 and 20 pages. Technical audiences like things detailed and comprehensive, while management audiences usually prefer a compact, highlighted and to the point presentation of facts. It is helpful in both cases to include diagrams, check lists, statistics and infographics.

Why content marketing is becoming so popular

The internet as well as blogs and social networks have multiplied the ways by which companies can influence target groups in their favour. The task of circulating useful information, professional knowledge or just entertaining content is no longer an exclusive domain of the media.

Such opportunities can be, and obviously are being, exploited. For instance, companies frequently take on the role of trade media, offering a depth of professional knowledge and competence that the trade media themselves could never achieve – and they find a grateful audience.

As a result, marketing is shifting further and further away from advertising and towards content-based marketing. White papers can play a vital role in demonstrating a company's competence and ultimately in winning customers.

2.2 White paper marketing

From a marketing perspective, a white paper is a tool whose purpose it is to motivate target groups engage with a company and its products.

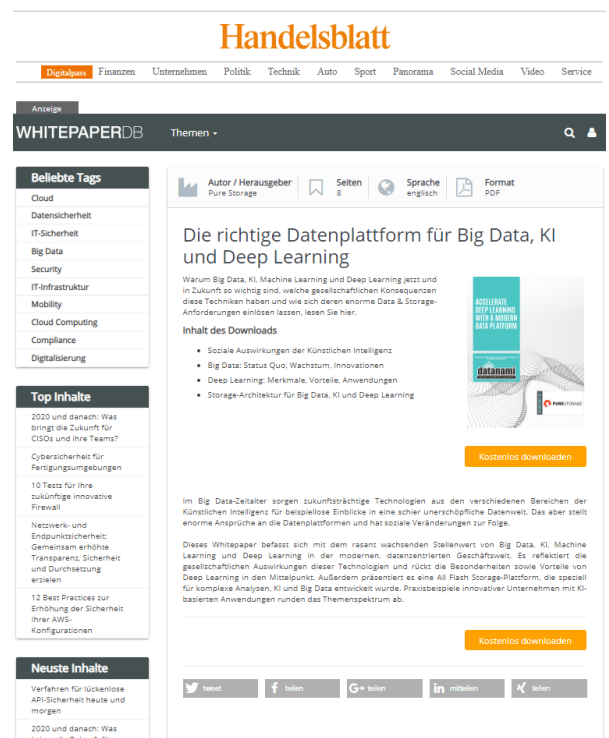
However, this happens indirectly. A white paper only sets a stage on which a specific product can be the leading character and, at most, describes the underlying plot. If a company sells security locks, for example, a white paper could discuss the security issues that exist in conventional locking systems and explain the advantages of security locks. However, the topic is presented objectively and without explicitly mentioning the company's products – let alone praising them.

The content of a white paper creates the context in which a product exists and is positioned in the market.

From a marketing perspective, a white paper's main job is to demonstrate a company's competencies and capabilities. Once this hurdle has been taken, white papers can foster trust in a company's products and create links between a problem and the company's relevant solutions on an ongoing basis.

From the company's communication perspective, white papers are starting points for a continued dialogue with existing and potential customers. They provide the conversation topics that can be used to create a dialogue with trade publications, on social media and in any contact with customers and the general public.

Since content-based communication is becoming more and more important, and content marketing is the biggest current trend, white paper marketing can be used to initiate coordinated cooperation between a company's communication, marketing and sales departments.



The screenshot shows a page from Handelsblatt with the following elements:

- Navigation:** Digitalbusiness, Finanzen, Unternehmen, Politik, Technik, Auto, Sport, Panorama, Social Media, Video, Service.
- Article Title:** Die richtige Datenplattform für Big Data, KI und Deep Learning.
- Author:** Autor / Herausgeber Pure Storage.
- Content:**
 - Warum Big Data, KI, Machine Learning und Deep Learning jetzt und in Zukunft so wichtig sind, welche gesellschaftlichen Konsequenzen diese Techniken haben und wie sich deren enorme Data & Storage-Anforderungen einstellen lassen. Lesen Sie hier.
 - Inhalt des Downloads:**
 - Soziale Auswirkungen der Künstlichen Intelligenz
 - Big Data: Status Quo, Wachstum, Innovationen
 - Deep Learning: Merkmale, Vorteile, Anwendungen
 - Storage-Architektur für Big Data, KI und Deep Learning
- Buttons:** Kostenlos downloaden (twice).
- Social Media:** Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, X icons.
- Sidebars:**
 - Beliebte Tags:** Cloud, Datensicherheit, IT-Sicherheit, Big Data, Security, IT-Infrastruktur, Mobility, Cloud Computing, Compliance, Digitalisierung.
 - Top Inhalte:** 2020 und danach: Was bringt die Zukunft für CISOs und ihre Teams?, Cybersicherheit für Fertigungsumgebungen, 10 Tests für Ihre zukünftige innovative Firewall, Netzwerk- und Endpunktsicherheit: Gemeinsam erhöhte Transparenz, Sicherheit und Durchsetzung erzielen, 12 Best Practices zur Erhöhung der Sicherheit Ihrer AWS-Konfigurationen.
 - Neueste Inhalte:** Verfahren für lückenlose API-Sicherheit heute und morgen, 2020 und danach: Was bringt die Zukunft für...

White paper marketing has been gaining ground in Germany – even in the daily business newspapers.

2.3 How to create a white paper

The purpose of a white paper is to demonstrate a company's competence and expertise. However, who exactly should handle this task?

The challenge is to gather the highly technical know-how of specialist departments and product managers and present it in a document that is easy to understand. Companies are faced with the dilemma whether such documents should be produced by the knowledge carriers themselves or by external authors. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages.

In-house white paper production has the advantage that the experts are directly and immediately accessible and that they have the greatest knowledge of the general context of a product and any related issues. This considered, the following questions arise:

- Can the experts communicate in a written language that meets the purpose described above, or do they easily lapse into incomprehensible technical jargon?
- Will they have enough time for the task?
- Will they give the task sufficient priority to deliver in an acceptable timeframe?
- Is there an internal or external instance that supports them and is capable of assessing the produced material in terms of content as well as language?

The quality of white papers that are produced in-house often suffers because one or several of these aspects have not been given the appropriate attention. The effect: The production of white papers is too slow and sporadic, topics are selected randomly, the produced text is difficult to read and does not meet the target group's information needs.

External white paper production can initially seem expensive because it comes with a price tag that is directly linked to the job, while the related in-house labour costs are often easily ignored. However, the use of external authors can have many advantages, provided the following issues are considered:

- Do the authors have sufficient basic knowledge on the subject?
- Do the authors have adequate access to the company's knowledge carriers?

Tips for creating white papers

- Think long term – one or two white papers alone will not make a difference.
- Talk to your company's product managers to find the right topics.
- Compile an editorial schedule. Extend or modify the schedule every time you encounter something interesting in terms of the market or environment in which your products and solutions are positioned.
- Define responsibilities for content creation and quality control.
- Ensure firm submission deadlines for white paper copy.

- Is there a clearly defined editorial schedule and firm delivery deadlines?
- Are there instances within the company who can control the quality of the copy?

Giving these questions adequate consideration enables companies to initiate a regular content generation process that can be useful far beyond the creation of white papers, for example for a blog on the company website, for articles in trade publications, for social networks activities and, not to be underestimated, for the company's own sales team for their discussion with customers.

Under no circumstances should the production of white papers be considered a one-off or occasional task. People who are serious about using white papers for lead generation should be clear about the fact that a single white paper creates a finite amount of interest. The good news, however, is that a B2B product's field of use tends to provide multiple occasions to talk about it.

2.4 White paper campaigns

Planning a white paper campaign is not very different from planning a media campaign. It begins with the definition of the intended target audience. This definition should be as precise as possible because, unlike media campaigns, white papers offer far more opportunities to address the special interests of individual sub-groups.

For example, if the decision to purchase a specific product is jointly made by a company's technical staff and business management, engineers must be reached via a more technically oriented white paper, while management needs to be convinced of a solution's strategic importance and long-term perspective.

Individual white papers covering a specific topic would then be promoted accordingly on different platforms, depending on which platform best reaches the intended target group.

Identifying the right outlets for white paper campaigns takes slightly more effort than for media campaigns because white paper campaigns can involve very different types of resources. For example, an email newsletter could be used alongside ads in daily newspapers, in the business press and in trade journals to promote the download of individual white papers.

Tips for white paper campaigns

- Choose your intended target groups very carefully in order to be cost efficient. The cost per lead can vary greatly between one target group and another.
- If possible, address all target groups you intend to reach simultaneously. This increases the probability that your content will be discussed between business managers and technical staff.
- Make your white papers available for download on your own website and insert a registration page before giving access. White papers represent valuable content for which you should be paid in leads.

3. Lead generation

3.1 General use of leads

White papers are usually designed to establish a relationship between a company and its target groups. Downloading a white paper normally involves being asked to leave some contact details and consent to being contacted by the publisher of the white paper (the vendor).

This consent, together with the contact details, is what constitutes a lead. It documents a person whose interest in the white paper's content was strong enough to fill in a form with their contact details and agree to being contacted by the company – nothing more.

Actually, this is already quite a lot. On the one hand, a user's consent allows a company's sales department to make direct contact. German data protection law prohibits companies from contacting potential customers without their consent. On the other hand, the lead may become a valuable sales asset in the future even if no sales conversation is achieved because there is no immediate purchase interest at the time of contact.

In the long run, lead generation helps a company fill its customer database with people who can be contacted directly as part of future marketing and sales activities. Depending on the type of information requested on the form, leads can be supplied with specific information to match their interests rather than bombarded with mailings until they are fed up and don't want to be contacted by the vendor at all.

3.2 Qualification criteria for leads

As discussed in the previous section, a lead documents a user's general interest for the content of a white paper. What is less obvious at first glance is the reason for their interest.

The general spectrum of motives for downloading a white paper ranges from a purely academic interest for a specific technology to a concrete, immediate intention to buy a certain product because the interested party is involved in the selection of project components at the time.

Therefore, how the generated leads will be used depends strongly on a company's specific priorities and resources. Many generally prefer to pass all leads to their sales department without any further processing and have their sales team contact the leads. This is particularly common with products in low price ranges.

Companies offering high-end products which involve six-digit project costs often get a service provider to qualify their leads. For this purpose, the service provider establishes, usually by phone, whether a project is pending, whether there is a budget for the project, or for which part of the project the contact makes the decisions.

Qualifying leads in house hardly ever makes economic sense. On the one hand, the time of a sales representative is usually far too valuable and expensive compared to a specialised service fee. On the other, there is a danger of "burning" the leads, i.e. putting them off by having inexperienced staff ask overly pushy questions on the phone.

The highest resulting lead qualification category includes what is called a "BANT lead". BANT is short for Budget, Authority, Need and Timeframe. A BANT lead describes a prospective customer who has immediate product requirements (Need), a project schedule (Timeframe), approved funding (Budget) and the relevant decision-making ability (Authority). However, in practice it is rarely possible to establish all four parameters.

3.3 Lead scoring and lead nurturing

Lead scoring and lead nurturing is where the long-term perspective of lead generation comes into play. A lead, once generated, is valuable in most cases even if it doesn't directly result in a sale at the time of its generation.

Not all leads are equal

The marketing world has many different terms to describe various qualifying levels for leads. Furthermore, individual companies use these terms in different ways. The following four-tier system is generally accepted in the US:

- Inquiries are simply interested persons whose exact motivation is yet unknown.
- A Marketing Qualified Lead is someone with a specified interest who can be given targeted information on specific products.
- A Sales Accepted Lead is someone who has been accepted by sales as a contact for a sales talk.
- A Sales Qualified Lead is someone whose immediate purchase interest can be converted into a sale.

Lead scoring involves monitoring users' activities, registering their interest in different topics and evaluating this interest via a scoring system.

User activity that is relevant for a company can be found wherever users make contact with an information source the company provides. This could, for instance, be the company website or an email newsletter that is sent out. For example, it is possible to register

- how often a user clicks on a link to a specific topic in a newsletter,
- how often a user downloads a white paper about a specific topic,
- whether the user searches for information on a specific product or keyword on the company website,
- and many other types of activity.

A predefined scoring system subsequently evaluates the registered activity in terms of quality and quantity. For example, downloading a white paper is worth 20 points, clicking on a link in a newsletter scores 10 points, searching for a specific product on the website scores 30 points.

Knowing about potential customers' specific interests allows a company to supply them with the right information at the right time – and spare them irrelevant offerings.

The frequency and intensity of a user's activity, on the other hand, provides insight into whether the user is currently involved in a project for which an interest in a specific product might exist. If so, this could be directly addressed in a sales talk.

This process can turn an interested party who simply downloaded a white paper on a specific topic into a paying customer over time. The marketing industry calls this "lead nurturing".

A long-term perspective on lead generation, particularly when combined with lead scoring and lead nurturing, seems to pay off. Various studies suggest that companies with a lead nurturing system achieve a 30 to 40 percent higher return on investment than companies without such a system. Incidentally, the increased cooperation between marketing and sales triggered by lead nurturing also brings greater mutual understanding and considerably enhances the effectiveness of both departments.

We have leads – now what?

- Decide whether to qualify the leads externally or internally.
- Be gentle in your initial conversation. You know that the lead was interested in the white paper, so talk about the subject of interest itself rather than the download.
- There will always be some people who say that they currently have no interest although they did register their details. Keep them on file anyway and monitor how they respond when offered different types of information. They could become customers in the long run.
- After the initial qualification, decide what to do with which leads. Who will directly be handled by sales and who is passed back to marketing for further nurturing?

4. Conclusion

The success of white paper marketing strategies will probably continue to grow in the German-language area and elsewhere. Effectiveness and cost efficiency are not the only advantages of this approach. The more marketing and sales shift towards electronic media, the more they use software tools for their work, and the greater the need for coordinated marketing and sales activities, the stronger the advantages of a lead generation strategy will come into play.

Other contributing factors are the availability of software and cloud services as well as specialised providers and media that offer the relevant services. Finally, the trend towards content marketing provides a stimulus to produce high-value content and use it to initiate a productive dialogue with customers.