

thatwhitepaperguy

How to Pick the Perfect Flavor for Your Next White Paper



A special report for B2B marketing executives

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Additional copies of this special report can be downloaded from
www.thatwhitepaperguy.com/report-how-to-pick-the-perfect-white-paper-flavor-register.html

Executive Summary

Ice cream comes in lots of different flavors. But year after year, three flavors are more popular than any others: vanilla, strawberry and chocolate.¹

It's the same with white papers. White papers may seem like they come in all different varieties, but three main flavors are more popular than any others.

Not every marketing executive understands these three flavors and how to use them. Without this knowledge, your marketing efforts can suffer from these problems:

- Publishing a confusing mishmash of white papers
- Trying to distinguish between too many subtle flavors
- Sticking to the same flavor, no matter what.

This special report proposes that the three top flavors of white papers are as different as vanilla, strawberry and chocolate. And any marketing executive can learn when to pick each flavor for best results.

These three most popular flavors of white papers are:

- The product backgrounder (vanilla)
- The numbered list (strawberry)
- The problem/solution (chocolate).

For each flavor, this report provides a definition, a suggested audience and how to approach them, a typical length and table of contents, notes on when to use it for best results and suggestions on how to repurpose it. A link to some samples of each flavor is provided.

And for quick reference, a table sums up the key characteristics of each flavor.

A final section discusses how to mix these three flavors.

This special report provides everything a marketing executive needs to understand the three main types of white papers and begin to use them more effectively.



White papers are like ice cream: The top three flavors are always the same

Why Bother with These Flavors?

Publishing white papers can be a very effective way to generate leads, build mindshare and cement sales. Many companies want them—but not every marketing executive understands the different flavors of white papers and how to use each one to best advantage.

If you don't understand the different white paper flavors, your marketing efforts can suffer from these problems:

Publishing a confusing mishmash of white papers:

A hodgepodge of conflicting elements will confuse readers and limit the effectiveness of any document.

Trying to distinguish between too many subtle flavors:

Many lists show eight to 10 different types of white papers.² Online marketing guru Perry Marshall names almost 40!³ That many distinctions are not helpful, when the vast majority of all white papers fall into three flavors.

Sticking to the same flavor, no matter what the situation:

This ignores the unique marketing challenges posed by different products at different stages of their life cycles. As the old saying goes, “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

This special report proposes that there are three basic flavors of white papers, as easy to tell apart as vanilla, strawberry and chocolate ice cream.

When prospects download a white paper, they usually know which flavor they want.

Understanding how to create and use each flavor of white paper will help you meet these expectations, and give you more flexibility to deal with a wider range of marketing challenges.



**A mishmash of flavors
will confuse readers and
harm your marketing**

FLAVOR #1:

The Backgrounder

The product backgrounder is like that old reliable flavor: vanilla ice cream. You don't get any surprises when you order vanilla.

Think of the product backgrounder as a “deep dish” about the features and benefits of a certain product or service. Best used for prospects near the end of the buying process, the backgrounder takes a relatively “hard sell” approach to pitch the technical or business benefits of an offering.

To many marketing executives, this is what white papers are all about. Once upon a time, all B2B white papers came in this flavor. In those days, white papers were used mainly to deliver technical information to prospects.

The backgrounder is also known as an “evaluator’s guide” or “product briefing.” These white papers explain some key features, functions and benefits of an offering, and are used to provide prospects more technical information than they can find in a brochure, data sheet or website.

This can still be a good format to help explain a new, unfamiliar or misunderstood product to a technical audience. But today, tastes have changed... and not every reader is satisfied with the same old flavor.

How to recognize a product backgrounder

Look for a product name in the title and a lot of product information in the body. Look for descriptions of features, functions, interfaces, modules, workflows, technologies, methodologies—the kind of technical details that used to be called “feeds and speeds.”

When to use a product backgrounder

There are two specific situations when a backgrounder can be the best flavor to pick.

Situation #1: Your firm is an undisputed leader in your field and easily attracts prospects. You don't have to work hard to build recognition for your company, and you usually end up on the shortlist of vendors being considered.

Many Fortune 500 companies don't need to work very hard to generate leads, since these “name brands” are already lodged firmly in every prospect's mind.

In technology, this includes companies like Cisco, Google, HP, IBM, Microsoft and Oracle. For this fortunate few, publishing backgrounders on their products makes sense.



A product backgrounder is as predictable as a vanilla ice cream cone

Situation #2: Your firm is launching a new product.

A backgrounder can be useful to support a product launch and help explain a new offering to journalists, analysts, channel partners and your own sales force.

Unfortunately, this flavor is used in many other situations where it is not the best choice.

Smaller vendors be warned: If your firm has to work hard to attract recognition, and if you seek to generate as many leads as possible from your white paper, the product backgrounder is a poor choice.

Why? Because it's like dipping into an empty tub of ice cream. The only prospects likely to encounter that type of white paper are already exploring your offering by name.

Executives from lead-gathering services like Knowledge Storm and TechTarget confirm that using a product name in a white paper title cuts downloads by at least 50%.⁴

If a prospect already knows your product by name, they will most likely search for more information right on your website. But this draws in only a small fraction of your universe of possible buyers.

Many more people will search the web for the solution to some nagging problem or for help understanding some issue. Since a product backgrounder does not answer these questions, the majority of prospects will never encounter it.

What to include in a product backgrounder

As shown in Figure 1, a product backgrounder is typically six to 10 pages plus an optional cover.

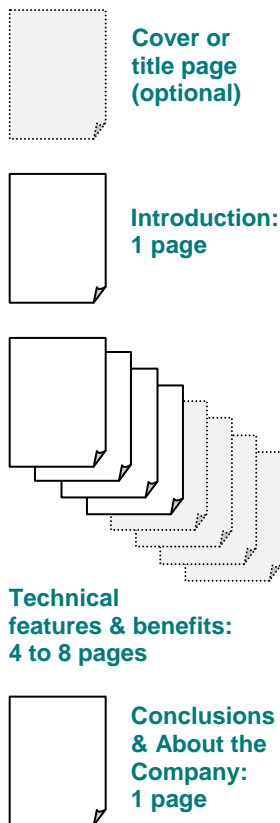
Start with a one-page introduction that describes the scope of the paper, the intended audience and the level of technical detail. (This tells them what you're going to tell them, an approach used by all good communicators.) Point to any other documents that provide more information.

Make sure to state the product's specific niche, category or genre to position it correctly in its market space.

In the main body, describe each feature in as much detail as required, and touch on the benefits of each feature to a buyer. Benefits make your backgrounder much more persuasive than a mere list of technical features.

Next offer a short conclusion to emphasize how all these features and benefits add up to the best offering on the market. (This tells them what you told them.)

Figure 1: Typical Page Count for Backgrounder (6 to 10 pages & cover)



Don't forget to include a brief call to action; this can be a single sentence describing where to find more information or how to move to the next step in the buying process.

Most backgrounders include a section called "About the Company." This can be the standard boilerplate from your company's website.

What to leave out of a backgrounder

Hype, vague statements, unsubstantiated claims and marketing-speak have no place in any white paper. In fact, these are like poison that will spoil any white paper.

In a backgrounder, you must stick to the facts and prove all your assertions with specs, benchmarks or test results.

Prospects deep in the buying process download a white paper to get technical details they can't find anywhere else. They are not looking for brochure-style fluff; they are seeking precise technical details.

Any white paper that wastes a prospect's time with marketing-speak is gambling with their patience. If this angers a prospect enough, they could even take your company off the shortlist of vendors they will pursue.

Repurposing a backgrounder

A backgrounder is relatively easy to repurpose as a product demo or webinar. Since a backgrounder is already focused on a particular product or service, it's usually straightforward to repurpose as a slide deck.

However, repurposing content does not change its intended audience. No matter what format you use to present it, this material will only interest prospects near the end of the buying process. It won't be suitable as a webinar to attract leads at the start of the buying process.

A backgrounder can be repurposed as a press release when the product is first launched and still has news value.

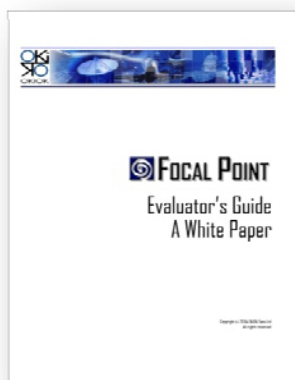
The bottom line on backgrounders

A backgrounder is easy to prepare, since it includes mostly technical information.

If your company is an industry leader that doesn't have to work hard to attract prospects, this flavor can be ideal. And a backgrounder is always good to help support a product launch.

But smaller companies beware: A backgrounder will not generate nearly as many leads as the other two flavors.

To see a backgrounder,
click on this thumbnail





A numbered list is as light and lively as strawberry ice cream

FLAVOR #2:

The Numbered List

The numbered list is like scrumptious strawberry ice cream: a light and lively treat that's easy to digest.

Think of this flavor as a set of tips, questions, answers or points about an issue. This provides a quick roundup of highlights that will appeal to anyone interested in the issue, along with the welcome promise of an easy read.

How to recognize a numbered list

Look for a title like “Four Best Practices...” or “Five Questions to Ask...” or “Six Things You Must Know...” Check for content broken up into numbered chunks. These are sure signs of a numbered list flavor.

When to use a numbered list

A numbered list really shines when your company needs some quick content to promote in a blog, e-newsletter or magazine—or to meet a commitment in your marketing calendar. While this flavor can't provide deep coverage of any issue, it is great for sharing a provocative perspective or casting FUD⁵ on the competition.

Numbered lists, in fact, are the quickest and easiest flavor to create. These do not demand a logical explanation from point A to point B. They can present an almost random set of points held together by the numbering system.

When time is short, consider a numbered list.

What to include in a numbered list

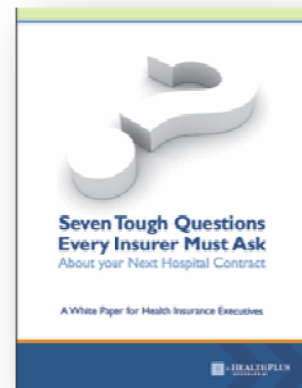
Start with a brief introduction that sums up the scope of the document, the intended reader and the issue.

In a longer paper, you can sum up all the numbered points as bullets. This tells readers what you're going to tell them.

In a short paper, a summary paragraph may be enough.

In the body, give each point in an order that makes sense.

For tips about a process, use chronological order. Or move from the whole to the parts, from the familiar to the unfamiliar or from the most significant to the least.



To see a numbered list, click on this thumbnail

Express all the headings in a parallel construction so they sound unified. An imperative, active voice works well:

- Tip #2: Do this.
- Tip #3: Don't do that.

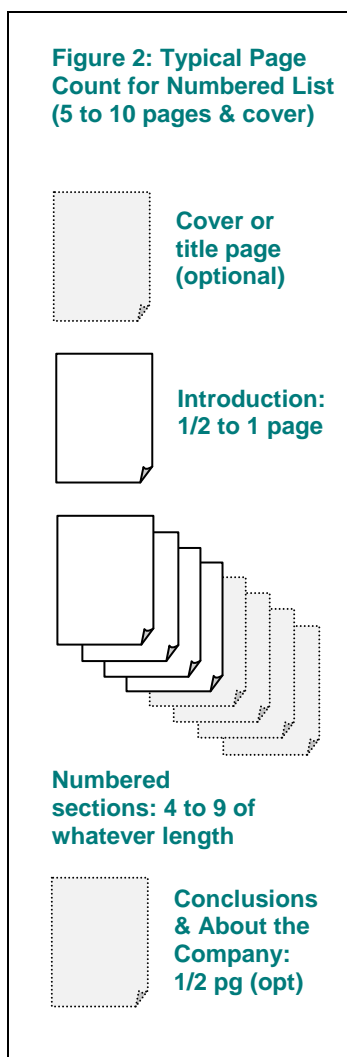
Between four and nine separate points is probably ideal. Any less than four sounds too brief, and any more than nine too long. Don't settle on 10 points, because you can easily sound like a David Letterman wannabe.

If you end up with close to 20 points, consider splitting them into two papers, perhaps titled something like "9 Questions to Ask..." and "8 More Questions to Ask..."

After the numbered sections, you may want to provide a half-page conclusion that wraps up the paper, along with a brief call to action; this can be a single sentence describing what to do next or where to find more information.

A brief "About the Company" section is optional in this flavor; this can be the standard boilerplate from your company's website.

A numbered list white paper is typically five to 10 pages, plus an optional cover, as shown in Figure 2.



What to leave out of a numbered list

Product details are out of place in this flavor. One exception: If you combine a numbered list with a backgrounder, such as "Five Things You Must Know about Firewalls in Product XYZ." Otherwise, keep your paper focused on the issue.

Of course, vague statements, flimsy claims and marketing-speak have no place in any white paper of any flavor. Remember, hype is like poison: It can spoil a perfectly good white paper of any flavor.

Repurposing a numbered list

A white paper in the numbered list flavor is easy to repurpose as an article, blog post or press release. Since magazines and websites thrive on numbered lists, these are the easiest flavor to place. While some observers caution that this flavor has been overused, readers and web surfers seem happy to keep seeking them out.

The bottom line on numbered lists

White papers as numbered lists are the fastest and easiest to create, and the easiest to place in a magazine or website. When time is short, consider using this flavor.

FLAVOR #3:

The Problem/Solution

The problem/solution flavor of white paper is like chunky chocolate ice cream: a rich and satisfying experience.

The problem/solution flavor is a persuasive essay that uses facts and logic to present a new solution to a serious nagging problem. A problem/solution provides useful information that helps your intended readers understand an issue, solve a problem or do their jobs better.

Best used for prospects at the start of the buying process, a problem/solution white paper does not pitch. Unlike a backgrounder, this flavor uses a “soft sell” to educate prospects about an issue and position your company as a trusted advisor.

When the time comes to buy, the theory goes, a prospect already feels positive about your company and inclined to do business with you.

How to recognize a problem/solution white paper

A problem/solution white paper provides little product information. Instead, it tends to focus on a broad industry problem and a better way to solve it, as implemented in a certain product or service. In this roundabout way, a problem/solution white paper positions an offering in a market space and argues for its superiority.

When to use a problem/solution white paper

The problem/solution flavor is becoming much more popular. This flavor makes sense for any company seeking to build recognition and attract as many prospects as possible.

Any smaller company that must struggle to generate leads and fight to get on to vendor shortlists should consider publishing at least one white paper.

Done properly, this document will have a long life: at least one year, often stretching into several. This long life, coupled with its supreme lead-generating powers, make the problem/solution white paper the best investment of all.

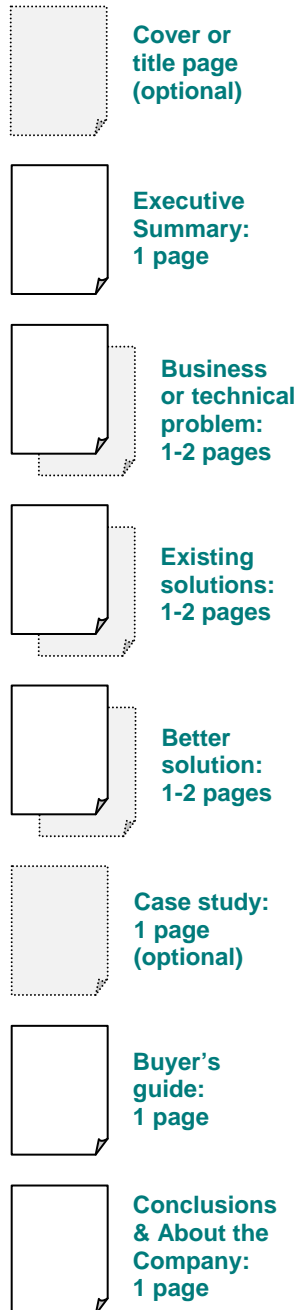
A problem/solution white paper, though, is the most difficult flavor to create. It will demand that marketing and sales executives take a pause from their regular habits of pitching and selling.

Instead, they must provide clear, compelling answers to some fundamental questions.



A problem/solution white paper provides a rich and satisfying experience, rather like chocolate ice cream

Figure 3: Typical Page Count for Problem/Solution (6 to 10 pages & optional cover)



Among the questions a problem/solution must answer:

- What problem does this offering aim to solve?
- What other solutions have been tried in the past?
- What drawbacks do other solutions suffer from?
- How does this offering overcome these drawbacks and solve the problem best?

Another challenge: A problem/solution white paper must present a mountain of proof.

For B2B buyers, proof points include specific numbers from impeccable sources, persuasive comments from acknowledged experts, compelling testimonials from delighted customers and iron-clad logic that ties it all together with chocolaty goodness.

Some marketing teams find these challenges daunting. They may want to retreat back to a product background, which is much easier to create. But it's usually better to push on to complete a problem/solution white paper that will generate leads and serve your company for years.

What to include in a problem/solution white paper

As shown in Figure 3, a problem/solution white paper is typically six to 10 pages plus cover.

Start with a one-page Executive Summary that describes the intended reader and what to expect from the rest of the paper. (Tell them what you're going to tell them.) This summary can be either a "preview" with highlights to attract readers to the rest of the document or a "synopsis" that provides a complete summary of the paper.

Then describe a nagging business or technical problem that plagues your reader's industry and has gone unsolved for some time.

Sketch in all the existing approaches that have been tried to solve this problem. It's best to express these as genres or classes, not specific products.

Then list the drawbacks of each genre or class. This is your chance to take your best shot at every competing solution... and clear the field for your new, improved solution.

Next, describe your recommended solution in generic terms. Staying generic adds to the educational value of your paper, rather than tasting like a sales pitch.

You can include a brief case study to highlight the positive experience of an actual customer with your product.

Then provide a short set of bullets that list what to look for in an ideal solution in your recommended category.

Of course, you want to make sure that every bullet points to some item that your company does best.

White paper expert Michael Stelzner calls this a “buyer’s guide... the most powerful and persuasive element of the entire white paper, because you have the opportunity to set the bar against which your competition will be judged.”⁷

In other words, **this checklist tilts the playing field in your favor without making a blatant sales pitch.**

It’s best to mention your offering by name only after the buyer’s guide—and then only to confirm that it’s an “ideal” solution that matches every bullet in the buyer’s guide.

Then include a brief call to action; this can be a sentence describing what to do next, where to find more information or how to take the next step in the buying process.

Finally, include a section “About the Company” drawn from the standard boilerplate on your company’s website.

What to leave out of a problem/solution white paper

Always leave product details out of a problem/solution white paper. Keep your paper focused on the business or technical problem and how to solve it, in generic terms.

Of course, vague statements, flimsy claims and marketing-speak have no place in any white paper of any flavor. Remember, hype is like poison: It can spoil a perfectly good white paper of any flavor.

Repurposing a problem/solution white paper

The “problem/existing solutions/best solution” approach of this flavor provides thought-provoking content that’s easy to repurpose as a presentation or webinar.

A few specific ideas can be extracted to create a blog post or press release. Some marketing teams create videos to highlight the key ideas from a problem/solution white paper and urge viewers to download it.

The rich content in a problem/solution flavor makes all this repurposing possible.

The bottom line on problem/solution white papers

Problem/solution white papers are the hardest of all flavors to create, since they must provide truly useful information.

But this flavor often provides the best return on investment, since these papers last longer and generate more leads than any other flavor. And the rich content of a problem/solution white paper makes this flavor the most versatile to repurpose in other ways.

To see a problem/solution white paper, click on this thumbnail

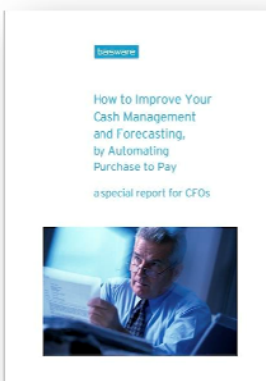


Table 1
The Three Main Flavors of White Papers



Backgrounder



Numbered List



Problem/Solution

	Backgrounder	Numbered List	Problem/Solution
Definition	A deep dish about the features and benefits of a certain product or service	A numbered set of tips , questions, answers or points about some issue	A persuasive essay that uses facts and logic to present a new solution to a problem
Also called	Evaluator's guide, product briefing	List-based article, Top 10 list	Special report, executive briefing, market overview
Audience	Prospects at the end of the buying process	Anyone interested in the issue	Prospects at the start of the buying process
Approach	A hard sell that pitches the technical or business benefits of a product or service	A light and lively roundup of points or highlights about some issue	A soft sell that educates prospects and positions you as a trusted advisor
When to use	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Your firm is a leader that easily attracts many prospects 2. To support a product launch 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To get quick content for a blog, e-newsletter, magazine or calendar 2. To spread FUD on your competitors 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To generate as many leads as possible 2. To build recognition for your company
Length	6-10 pages & cover	5-10 pages & cover	6-10 pages & cover
Typical sections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Product or service features and benefits • Conclusions & call to action • About the Company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Between 4 and 9 numbered points • Conclusions & call to action • About the Company (optional) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive Summary • Nagging problem • Existing solutions and drawbacks • Recommended solution • Case study (optional) • Buyer's guide • Conclusions & call to action • About the Company
Leave out	Hype, marketing-speak	Product features, hype, marketing-speak	Product features, hype, marketing-speak
Repurpose as	Demo, webinar, press release (launch only)	Blog post, magazine article, press release	Presentation, webinar, blog post, press release

What about Mixing Flavors?

You can also create four mixed flavors of white papers, as described below. White papers in the first two mixtures can turn out quite tasty. But the last two are most often an unhappy mess.

Numbered list & problem/solution: Try this mix when you want to provide a lighter take on an industry problem and how to solve it. For example, I wrote a white paper called “Three Critical Challenges on any ARRA Construction Project” that mixed three aspects of an industry problem with the overall structure of a problem/solution.

This special report you are reading is another example: It names a big problem—that many executives don’t understand how to use white papers effectively—and then lists the three main types and how to use them best.

Numbered list & backgrounder: Try this mix when you want to lighten up a backgrounder with a numbered list or spread some product-specific FUD⁵ on your competitors.

For example, I wrote a white paper called “EFM Evaluation Guide: 20 Must-Have Capabilities for a True Enterprise Feedback Management System” that listed a set of desirable features for a genre of software. This checklist confirms that one vendor has the most capable offering on the market.

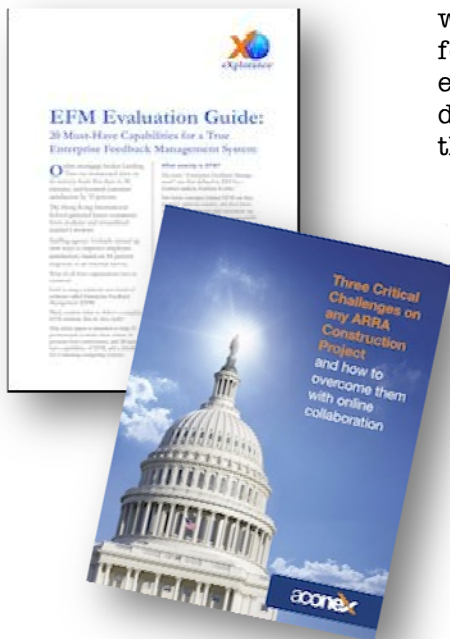
Problem/solution & backgrounder: This mix is hard to get right. Remember that a problem/solution describes a better way to solve an industry problem, while a backgrounder focuses on one product’s features and benefits. The educational value of the problem/solution can easily be diluted by the hard-sell of the backgrounder. Why not serve them up separately as two different documents?

Neapolitan (all three): While this is a surprisingly popular flavor of ice cream, this three-way combo is rare for white papers. It’s hard to imagine such a mishmash of flavors satisfying anyone. How could anyone combine the product details of a back-grounder **plus** a numbered list **plus** a new, improved solution to an unsolved industry problem?

The bottom line on mixing flavors

Be careful what you mash together. Not every flavor goes well with the others. The numbered list mixes well with either other flavor. But the problem/solution and the backgrounder do not go well together, since each has such a different flavor.

To see some mixed white papers, click on these thumbnails



Conclusions

To help B2B marketing executives use white papers more effectively, this special report compares and contrasts the three main flavors of white papers.

The product backgrounder describes the technical or business benefits of a product or service with a direct sales pitch. This flavor won't generate as many leads as the other flavors, but it is easier to prepare. If your company is an industry leader that doesn't have to work hard to attract prospects, a backgrounder can be ideal. This flavor is also a good choice to support a product launch.

The numbered list provides a set of points, questions or highlights about an issue. This is the fastest and easiest flavor to create and the easiest to place in a magazine or third-party website. This is also the best flavor to mix with either of the others.

The problem/solution presents an industry problem, the drawbacks of all existing solutions and a new, improved solution: your offering. This flavor is the hardest to create, since it must provide truly useful information backed up by a mountain of proof. But this flavor usually provides the best return on investment, since these papers last longer and generate more leads than any other flavor.

With the knowledge in this special report, you can pick the perfect flavor for your next white paper.

And for help creating a white paper that gets noticed and gets results, call Gordon Graham at (705) 842-2428 Eastern or e-mail Gordon@ThatWhitePaperGuy.com



With this special report,
you can pick the perfect flavor
for your next white paper



That White Paper Guy is Gordon Graham, an award-winning writer who has worked on 150+ white papers

About the Author

“That White Paper Guy” is Gordon Graham, an award-winning writer who has worked on more than 150 white papers for companies like Google, HP and Rackspace... plus many smaller firms with big ideas.

Since 2001, Gordon has done research, written articles and given presentations to hundreds of professionals on how to make white papers better.

Gordon has taught communication at two universities and in-house at companies including Cisco, Ericsson and Sprint. He has also written close to 1,000 magazine articles on technology for everyone from accountants to woodworkers.

To check out many articles on how to get better results from white papers, visit www.ThatWhitePaperGuy.com.

And for help creating a white paper that gets noticed and gets results, call Gordon Graham at (705) 842-2428 Eastern or e-mail Gordon@ThatWhitePaperGuy.com

Notes

1: International Ice Cream Association and The NPD Group's National Eating Trends. Some years another flavor ties or pulls ahead of strawberry, but strawberry is always in the top four.

2: Including the ones I compiled years ago when I was first researching white papers... but now I know better.

3: Perry Marshall, “The Definitive Guide to Writing and Promoting Your White Paper,” Perry Marshall & Associates, 2003, page 14

4: Gordon Graham, “How to Use White Papers to Grow a Healthy Crop of Leads: 20 tips from Bitpipe and KnowledgeStorm,” SoftwareCEO.com, November 16, 2004 available from www.thatwhitepaperguy.com/white-paper-article-how-to-generate-leads-with-a-white-paper.html

5: Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt: a classic marketing tactic used to undermine a competitor

6: Jonathan Kantor, “Crafting White Paper 2.0: Designing Information for Today's Time and Attention-Challenged Business Reader,” Lulu Publishing, 2009, pages 62-65

7: Michael Stelzner, “Writing White Papers: How to Capture Readers and Keep Them Engaged,” White Paper Source Publishing, 2007, page 107

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