Modern Writing Services

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Make White Papers Matter

Here at MWS, our clients in manufacturing and finance often cite white papers as their most significant external communications challenge. It's true: a white paper, while a supremely powerful marketing strategy, can throw down some tricky obstacles. A strong white paper generates leads, positions a company as an industry expert, and stands as an effective marketing legacy, but a weak white paper wastes time and money and may ding a company's reputation.

WHITE PAPERS: A PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOL
In our experience, the most effective white papers are 6- to 8-page documents that analyze a complex problem, offer expert analysis and give an objective assessment of potential solutions. When successful, a white paper enables readers to identify the authoring company as the solution's source – not because of a direct pitch but because the paper positions the company as an industry leader with a balanced perspective.

EASY MISSTEPS
Ineffective white papers often suffer from one of two maladies: they fail to quickly

grab readers' attention, or they slip into sales-speak. The title and first sentences must first signal that a white paper is interesting, applicable, and offers a significant return on investment. This means promptly and memorably identifying a familiar pain point. A white paper must then maintain a balanced, informative tone: salesman-like posturing discredits content and alienates readers.

BEST PRACTICES

Know the audience. A finance manager has a different set of needs and interests than an operations officer or an engineer. Effective white papers are explicitly pitched to key decision-makers.

Accept that looks matter. Every reader skims and skips before committing to a focused read. Effective white papers offer visually compelling material by deploying graphics to demonstrate key processes, using type and layout to strategically highlight key ideas and keeping branding to a minimum.

Strike a balance. A balanced tone communicates credibility, but balance must also be struck with content. Effective white papers offer both detailed information *and* concise analysis, often by featuring key case studies that strategically contextualize technical terms.

Give it legs. To reach its customer base, a white paper should be sent to prospective customers, partner companies and relevant media outlets. White papers can also be handed out at trade shows or conferences and used to organize webinars. Think broadly to maximize benefits.

Hire a professional. Subject-matter experts play a crucial role in identifying topics and ensuring technical accuracy, but white papers take time, and their writers must be experienced and able to maintain a clear – and clearly interesting – voice.

Save Time with Style Sheets

Whether toiling over a white paper, an internal report, or a client-facing publication, most professionals will reap radical rewards from using a style sheet.

A style sheet is a quick-reference document that ensures consistent and error-free work. Although generally created by editors to record a publisher and an author's preferences on spelling, punctuation, number usage, terminology usage, and other elements of style, style sheets offer an invaluable tool for efficiently correlating interdepartmental corporate work.

This is partly due to the team-written nature of corporate documents. When work is brainstormed, planned, drafted, edited, revised, and posted or published by different team members, errors and simple inconsistencies occur. Rectifying such errors is time-consuming but necessary because most readers equate consistency with polish, professionalism, and ultimately, effective branding.

When we create style sheets here at MWS, we begin with a concise repository of the AP or in-house style rules most pertinent to the document. We follow with an alphabetized list of relevant terminology and usage. Anything from the preferred fonts for headers, to the appropriate convention for serial commas, to the ideal use of acronyms can find a place on the style sheet.

The style sheet is not, however, a static reflection of a single document. Instead, it acts as a flexible template for future writing. Ideally, a writer at any point in the writing process can simply consult the style sheet to determine whether "basis points," for example, should be spelled out or abbreviated as a plural acronym.

Ultimately, a style sheet streamlines content and economizes editorial work. With assiduous updating, it can even constitute a comprehensive in-house style guide.

Nota Bene

In our research for clients, we often discover articles that provocatively illustrate the intersection of business and writing. Here, we share a few with you.

1. Companies win clients by delivering data with a story
2. Technology-enabled collaboration produces results

About MWS:
Created by PhDs Molly Gage and Jessica Knight, MWS offers writing and editorial expertise for high-stakes projects

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