

White Papers-A Copywriting Niche with Little Competition

By Krishna Avva

In last month's Freebird Issue 10, Sandy Probst's article, "Dear Junk Mail Hater" discussed the variety of marketing communications a copywriter produces, other than "junk mail." If you have a strong understanding of a technology or a specific industry, consider writing white papers. This largely undiscovered niche could be a full-time enterprise or an additional copywriting service you can provide.

One point of distinction used in this article: "client" is your client and "customer" is the client's customer.

What is a white paper?

Jason Ciment says in his article ""Star Light, Star Bright, How You Shine So Paper White":

When a prospect picks up a white paper, she is, in effect, saying two things:

- *"How will your product or service solve my needs right now?"*
- *"Teach me what I need to know to make a good decision."*

White papers need to present your company favorably and reinforce why your organization should be selected over your competition. Since the goal is to ultimately influence a prospective customer into becoming an actual customer, you need high-impact white papers that can be easily understood by your audience and clearly demonstrate how your solution can solve the person's critical needs.

White papers are not limited to technology related topics. Many white papers explain positions in various industries, such as Insurance, Financial Planning, Pharmaceutical Usage, etc.

How does a white paper as a form of marketing collateral fit in with a typical copywriter? Quite well. The average writer of white papers represents a focused technical person, trained almost exclusively in technology, who may have taken an obligatory college technical writing class or never had any formal writing training. Opportunities for writing white papers are limitless for anyone with a fundamental ability to understand technology or industry. Unlike the average technical writer, an experienced copywriter has skills to translate technology into words any customer can understand.

Basic Skills Needed

The basic skills needed to write white papers are the ability to ask the same questions a prospective customer is likely to ask and blend the answers into a well-crafted paper. You don't need a college degree in the industry, but a strong familiarity with the buzzwords and basic concepts are a must.

A technical writer produces functional white papers, but a copywriter brings out the compelling aspects and advances the customer through the lead generation process. An effective white paper answers all the customers' questions and allows him to make informed decisions. A well-crafted white paper brings out company XYZ's product benefits of lowering the customer's costs as well as making the air surrounding the customer's factory smell like jasmine as opposed to a competitor whose product smells like old socks.

Effective White Papers Save Clients Money

An effective white paper saves the client money by reducing calls to the customer support desk or sales team for questions on how products and services work. For example, a company provides a less than stellar white paper to hand out at a trade show. A hundred potential customers pick up the paper to read later because the marketing folks working the booth are too busy to speak with everyone individually. Eighty percent of the customers toss the paper because the formulaic title

tells them nothing. The remaining 20% spend frustrating time calling the company with questions that could have been easily answered in the white paper. So, 80% of the potential customers are gone immediately and 20% are annoyed by inconvenience. Based on lost potential sales, the value of a good white paper justifies itself.

Estimating the work

Estimating work varies per project as in any typical copywriting piece. The exception is talking more with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to make sure you reflect content accurately. Be certain to cover added meetings in your time and effort estimate:

- Get all available collateral on the topic from the company and/or experts.
- Build time into your schedule for SMEs to get back to you. Technical people are notorious for not respecting non-techies. Persistence pays.
- Is it a new product? If yes, build in a lot of time for revisions as the client decides how it works. Existing products are more stable and the changes should be minimal.
- Understand expectations on meetings/conference calls. Extra meetings and calls to get your material add to the project time.
- Will you "test" the document to prove the described concept works? It's a personal preference, but unless you have quality control experience, a copywriter will likely recommend the client perform the testing and validation.
- Build in the cost of rewrites, if needed.
- Build in the cost of any document reviews or specify only X reviews with X changes based on those reviews. Charge extra for any major changes.
- Determine if charts, tables or pictures are needed (hint: probably). Who provides or generates these? You? Build that effort into the estimate.

Estimating the bid

Now, the important question, how much can you make writing white papers? Two methods to calculate your price are Hourly and Flat Fee. There are pros and cons for each method. Weigh the pros and cons before deciding which method to use. Never estimate or bid white paper projects by the word. With charts, tables and pictures thrown in, the word count becomes meaningless.

Hourly

Make sure the proposal clearly states what activities are included as billable hours. An example, travel time to the client site is normally not billable. Another example, research time typically can't be charged. Bump up your rate to compensate for these. The industry sometimes considers white paper creation the same as technical writing, so rates are equivalent to technical writers, averaging \$30-75/hour, depending on your experience level in the industry.

Pros –If a lot of meetings or phone calls are required, you are compensated for the time involved. If a lot of unknown factors exist, you're not stuck with a low bid. Payment spreads out more on a continuous basis. An incomplete estimate will not hurt you.

Cons – Client may require you onsite, so they can keep an eye on you. There may be an expectation to work more quickly. The rate may be lower than you want because the client compares you to a technical writer. As you become more proficient in the company/industry, writing white papers will take you fewer hours, so you don't gain the benefits and efficiencies of experience in your rate, unless you negotiate a higher rate.

Flat Fee

A flat fee is the more prevalent method of bidding on white paper projects. White papers vary from 10-18 pages. For your estimate preparation, get a reasonable idea how many charts/tables and pictures are needed and who creates them. Also estimate the number of meetings or phone calls needed to collect all your material. Based on the number of pages it takes for you to lay out the content, the rate ranges from \$100 - \$500/page. Give a total price without your estimate breakout, so you have flexibility to adjust the bid as needed.

Pros – Flat fees are preferable for recurring engagements, so you get a different price for each piece. Require some payment upfront. Clearly spell out expectations and scheduled deliverables.

Cons – If the effort required to complete the project greatly exceeds the estimate, you still bear the responsibility to finish the job with professionalism and integrity. If you don't define the agreement clearly, the customer may keep asking for changes.

Useful links

www.whitepapersource.com/forum/index.php - great forum for questions on the White Paper business, from both experienced pros and new writers

knowledgestorm.com - a good repository of white papers in several industries

www.bitpipe.com - A good collection of IT White Papers, Case Studies, webcasts and product literature

www.stelzner.com/copy-whitepapers.html - Great newsletter and you can download a white paper on white papers.

www.clickz.com/experts/archives/aff_mkt/aff_mkt/article.php/1347861 - Excellent article by Jason Ciment, "Star Light, Star Bright, How You Shine So Paper White." He also gives some good tips on how to structure the white paper.

If you claim expertise in a particular industry, white papers represent a very lucrative area for copywriters. Technologists write most white papers with no understanding of simple, compelling copy. With your copywriting skills, you have the ability to make the documents a must-read and can establish yourself in a very strong and long-term niche.

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