



An Interview With Michael A. Stelzner

Q: What are the challenges *Writing White Papers* covers and how does it give the readers the tools to meet those challenges?

Stelzner: We live in a world where thousands of documents are vying for prospects' time. And this book will help you cut through and rise above everything, attracting that ideal reader. This is a key challenge: How do you grab eyeballs through words? One of the core premises of the book is capturing readers and keeping them engaged.

Another challenge is there's no documented standard for writing white papers, until now. For example, there's never been a book written on the topic of writing white papers. If you look in a technical writing book, you're lucky to find one sentence or a page written on the topic of white papers. This book has more than 200 pages on the subject. The book provides everything anyone would need to know to write a well-received white paper.

Q: What is the payoff to knowing how to craft a good white paper?

Stelzner: Well-written white papers help people make decisions, such as buy a product, sign a contract or follow a new initiative. Often, white papers go viral and have a big influence on an industry.

Good white papers are prospect magnets. They are able to fly under the radar and penetrate most organizations' anti-marketing defenses because they are sought after and brought into the organization by decision-makers. This means leads for the sponsoring company and ultimately sales.

The payoff to knowing how to craft a good white paper includes prestige for the writer. A well-crafted white paper will help a business become more successful.

Q: What are some of the main differences between knowing how to write and knowing how to write a white paper?

Stelzner: I think many people know how to write. However, knowing how to write a white paper means you need to know how to write persuasively AND informatively. Most people only know how to do one, not both. The book spends a lot of time helping to bridge that gap.

Many writers need to change their mentality of writing about their company and their product, and instead write about solving customers' problems. This is a big change for people who are used to writing about specific solutions and the features of their products.

Another key thing is that you only have a few seconds to capture the attention of someone with a white paper, so it's critical to understand how to write a title, how to write the opening page and being ultra-relevant to the reader.

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Q: Why do you say, “Writing white papers is an art form”?

Stelzner: Resonating with people is an art form. Writing something that will persuade and inform is an art form. When you sit down to a meal and it's spectacular, there's something different about it.

Anybody can put words to paper, but few people know how to write something that's digestible—meaning the reader wants to stick with the paper to the end and wants more. And the best white papers do just that. They keep you captivated and leave you hungry for more.

It's the difference between a McDonald's hamburger and a Ruth's Chris steak. They're both beef, but there's something distinctly fine about the Ruth's Chris steak.

Q: It has been said that your book is setting the first-ever standard for writing white papers. Why do you think it's important to have a standard in this ever-growing market?

Stelzner: Standards are needed because one-page advertisements and 100-page books are being mislabeled as “white papers.” It's such a popular term right now that it's losing its meaning.

Some of the foundational work for this book was a survey of over 500 white paper writers. I took feedback from them and my own experiences and crafted the strategies that are in this book. This book will set the standard. It's a bold statement, but it's true.

Q: How does one make a white paper compelling and how does the book detail the methods for doing that?

Stelzner: Really, there are three key steps: relate to your readers' needs and problems; educate, don't sell; and provide a logical next step.

The book provides a detailed platform for executing a compelling white paper. It talks about the importance of identifying the ideal reader and includes many questions you can ask to define who that reader is.

The book clearly lays out a case for performing a soft sale through education. This means avoiding the mention of your product and company name until the last pages of the document, yet selling readers nonetheless. The selling is really covert.

Lastly, the book addresses the importance of guiding the reader to a logical action step. This call to action can be access to a special report, a discount or even a phone number to call.

Q: What inspired you to write this book?

Stelzner: The success of a white paper that I wrote some time back spurred me to write this book. The white paper was called, “How to Write a White Paper: A White Paper on White Papers.” I was absolutely shocked how many people requested it: About 4,000 in the first year and more than 35,000 to date have downloaded the paper. It showed me there was a void that needed to be filled.

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Q: What are your predictions about the demand for white papers and how do you think this book will enable people to keep ahead of the demand?

Stelzner: Demand currently exceeds capacity. There's more demand for white papers to be written than people who can write them. This supply shortage will continue for many years to come because other industries outside the technology marketplace are rapidly adopting white papers as well. For example, financial services, human resources and just about any other business-to-business market you can imagine.

This book will help people stay ahead of the demand. It will empower anyone to write a white paper. For a business, that means the product manager or the engineer can do it themselves. For freelancers, that means they can learn to master this skill and add it to their portfolios.

WhitePaperSource: What are some common mistakes white paper writers make that you address in your book?

Stelzner: One of them is wordiness—going on and on about topics that don't matter to the reader. Another is writing titles that are boring. When the title is dull, it's like a door without a knob. If readers can't get past the title, why would they ever read the rest of the white paper?

A common mistake is immediately talking about the product or the company. It's better to lead with problems or needs. If you want to talk about your solution, do so generically. For example, begin by talking about overnight business delivery rather than FedEx Express. If the white paper appears as though it's selling, it won't be read.

WhitePaperSource: How does this book address technical communicators?

Stelzner: Many people who are technical don't know how to write persuasively. A white paper is really meant to infuse informative writing with persuasion. *Writing White Papers* will help the technically inclined person understand how to add persuasion to their work.

WhitePaperSource: What about those for whom writing is not the core competency?

Stelzner: Often writing is not a core competency for an engineer, a marketing person or a student. *Writing White Papers* is a guidepost with lots of examples that demonstrate how to craft a paper that will be well-received. It provides detailed outlines and focuses on the importance of the first page, the title and every other key aspect of writing white papers. I feel confident that anyone could write a compelling white paper after reading this book and applying its practical principles.

WhitePaperSource: How would you respond to folks who say there is not a proven process for writing white papers?

Stelzner: Actually, there is a proven process. Many white papers are very successful, so obviously somebody's doing it right. The problem is it's never been documented. There are a lot of great white papers out there. I looked at what they share in common, combined my unique experience and I discuss how to apply proven strategies in this book.

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For example, good white papers persuade and inform, are very targeted to specific readers and have an engaging title. Often they include key elements, such as market drivers, historical discussions and benefits.

WhitePaperSource: How do well-crafted white papers give any company an edge on the competition?

Stelzner: First, white papers attract people into the sales cycle. Second, they can help businesses establish a leadership position, whether or not they have real products. Third, for many businesses, white papers are necessary to compete and survive.

WhitePaperSource: What are key areas you cover in the book?

Stelzner: In *Writing White Papers*, I talk about the importance of the needs assessment, white paper outlines and interviewing—which is key. I also talk about where to find research, writing the first page and crafting compelling titles. A lot of the book focuses on creating the core of the white paper, such as developing problem statements, identifying benefits and writing a clear call to action. There's also information about formatting white papers, general strategies for writing and a chapter on how to generate leads with white papers.

Michael A. Stelzner is the author of *Writing White Papers: How to Capture Readers and Keep Them Engaged* (WhitePaperSource Publishing, October 2006, \$34.95 Hardcover).

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