UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF THE WHITE PAPER

The Background

A leading information security company wanted to use plain language to explain how their product proactively protected against outbreaks. They had not been getting the desired traction from their white papers, and were ready for a new approach.

The Challenge

The internal template for white papers was dense and difficult to read. Management knew that a new approach was needed, yet was hesitant to change the structure.

The Request

"We need an engaging white paper that administrators will actually read. And we need it immediately, to coincide with a major industry event." The project required quick turnaround and extensive communication with the product manager and key development resources.

The First Step

I begin every project with research. As usual, my first step was to review all of the raw materials that were provided to me. This helped the story to emerge, as well as identify the gaps that need to be filled. I also did a quick assessment of the white paper template, suggesting areas of improvement.

Next, I reviewed competitors' products to better understand what other options existed in the marketplace. This helped me to place customer's experience in the context of other available technologies.

I then scheduled calls with the product manager and developer. They filled in the gaps that weren't included in the original reference materials, and added details about the customers' pain points. This helped me to structure the paper in a way that would draw the administrators in.

What Changed?

- In past papers, the company used its white papers to tell the story it wanted to push. In this paper, the tone shifted to addressing customers' pain points, specifically addressing what they needed to know to solve their problems.

- Clear subheads allowed customers to skim for the highlights of the paper.

- Images, charts and graphics were easy to skim, yet provided clarification of the text.

- Body text provided a comprehensive story for when the customer had time to sit down and read in detail.

The Company

Revenue: >$900 million

Employees: >3,000

Industry: Information Security

Image courtesy Giulio Magnifico via Unsplash.com.

The Process

In any project, writing doesn't begin until the research is complete. Each project needs to strike a balance between what the company wants to say, and what a customer actually needs. My goal always is to weight that balance in the favor of the customer's needs, unless the technology is so radical and revolutionary that it addresses an issue that the customer doesn't yet know can be solved.

In this case, paper would first be released at the upcoming industry event, and would subsequently be printed and handed to prospective customers by sales reps. In both situations, the recipient doesn't have time to immediately read a multi-page document in detail. Therefore, it was important to make the text and supporting visuals clear and skimmable.

I was given license to deviate somewhat from the standard corporate template. Gone were uninformative subheads like, "Introducing [PRODUCT NAME]" or "The Challenge." New subheads summarized and communicated key information, such as "86% of all virus activity enters through the gateway," or "Inline scanning for the entire email system."

The Result

The process included a first draft and two rounds of follow-up edits. The final white paper featured six pages of straightforward content, neither unnecessarily complex nor inappropriately simple.

The text quickly addressed the question of "How will this product make my job easier?" Images, charts and graphs were included to reinforce the messages in the text.

The paper was used for several years until the product line was discontinued.