

White Paper Attitudes and Preferences: A Study of Business Technology Decision Makers

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Executive Summary

In September 2008, IT Business Edge surveyed its audience of business technology decision makers to explore their opinions, habits and preferences regarding the selection and use of vendor-produced white papers. The ultimate goal of the study was to channel research findings into practical advice that would help vendors produce white papers that are attractive to technology decision makers while effectively marketing the vendors' products and services.

Key findings of the research include:

- 55% of participants said they download one to five white papers each month, while more than 40% said they download six or more.
- More than 60% said each white paper they download is typically read by two or more people, and half of that 60% said three or more read each white paper.
- White papers are especially popular sources of information at key early stages of the purchase cycle, but they are also read by a significant number at later stages when vendor selections take place.
- IT Management and Executive Management groups have nearly identical decision-making authority and influence when it comes to technology purchases. At a slightly lower stratum, IT Staff and Non-IT Managers share a similar level of authority and influence.
- Topic is the most important factor affecting the decision to download a white paper. When it comes to topics, business issues are measurably more important than technical details, while both are significantly more important than product information.
- Nearly half of survey participants use personal e-mail accounts all or some of the time when registering to download white papers for business use.
- Participants perceive white papers produced by trusted third parties as more valuable than vendor-produced white papers.
- 46% of participants thought the best length for white papers was "5 to 8 pages" while 33% chose "1 to 4 pages."
- The majority of white paper readers are not offended by information about a vendor's products, as long as it is presented in the proper context.
- 97% of participants prefer that a vendor follow up with them via e-mail, while only 3% prefer phone contact, and most prefer that the vendor waits at least a few days before contacting them.

Best practices suggested by the results of this research include making sure each white paper has an appealing topic that is clearly communicated in the title. Vendors should remember that not all business technology decision makers have a highly technical background and avoid making white papers too technical. They should be prepared to nurture white-paper-generated leads over a period of time, because many technology decision makers read white papers early in their purchasing cycle, but they should identify those leads who are at later stages for quick and aggressive follow up by the sales team.

Research Goals and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the opinions, habits and preferences of business technology decision makers regarding their selection and use of vendor-produced white papers. Earlier research with the IT Business Edge audience had indicated that white-paper content is an important information source for its members and that IT Business Edge was a trusted source of such information for them. This project was designed to discover key factors affecting their selection and use of white papers, as well as the characteristics that they felt made a white paper more useful. The ultimate goal was to channel the findings of this study into practical advice that could help IT Business Edge clients produce and promote white papers that would be more attractive and valuable to technology decision makers inside and outside of the IT Business Edge audience.

The primary research for this study was conducted in September 2008. US and Canadian members of the IT Business Edge audience received e-mail invitations to participate in an online survey asking about their white-paper preferences. As an incentive, the invitation offered survey participants an opportunity to be included in a sweepstake for a Garmin Nuvi 2000 GPS device. A total of 797 individuals completed the survey. At a 95% confidence level, the margin of error for the survey results is +/- 4.0%.

Demographics

The demographics of the participants in this study tracked roughly to those of the 2008 IT Business Edge Subscriber Study and previous analysis of the IT Business Edge registered user database. More than 40% of participants were in IT management roles, while 20% were in management roles outside the IT department. A total of 60% were in IT roles, including both staff and management.

Table A: Job role

Job role	Percentage
IT Executive (CIO, CTO, VP of Technology, etc.)	10.4%
Non-IT Executive (CIO, CFO, VP, etc.)	8.6%
IT Director or Manager	17.1%
Non-IT Director or Manager	11.4%
IT Systems Director or Manager	4.3%
IT Project Director or Manager	10.3%
IT- or Technology-Related Consultant	11.4%
Systems/Network Administrator	7.5%
Other IT Staff	10.3%
Other Non-IT Staff	8.9%

Looking at company size, just over 42% were in organizations with more than 1,000 employees, while 24% were in companies with 101 to 1,000 employees. Small businesses were represented by 34% of the survey participants, whose organizations had 100 or fewer employees.

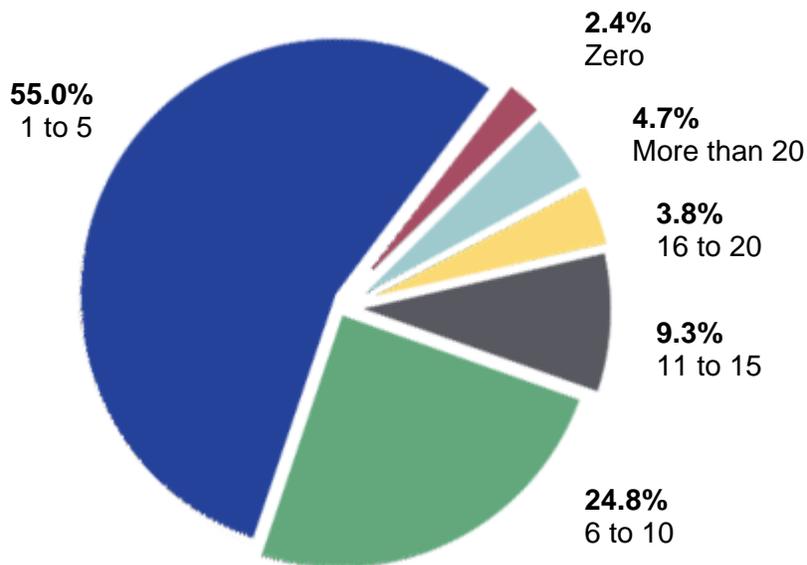
Table B: Company size

Company size	Percentage
More than 10,000	20.3%
5,001 – 10,000	6.1%
2,001 – 5,000	8.6%
1,001 – 2,000	7.6%
501 – 1,000	8.4%
101 – 500	15.3%
21 – 100	14.1%
20 or fewer	19.8%

White-Paper Consumption Volume

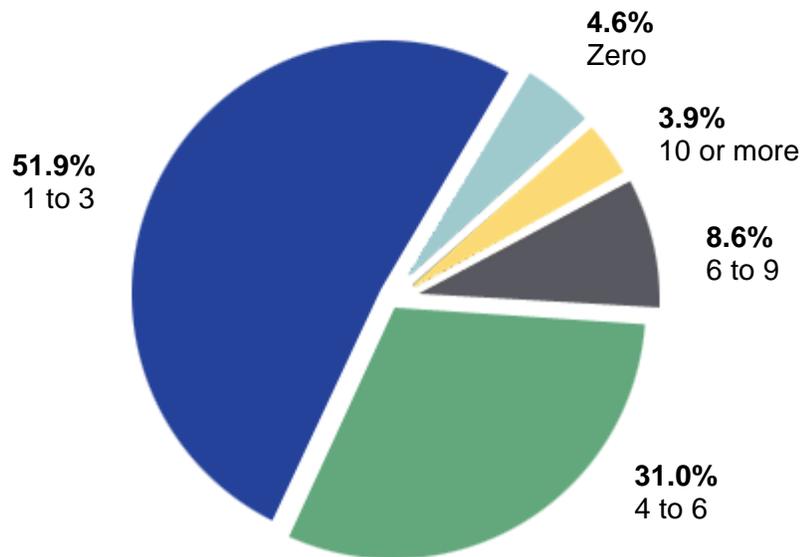
The majority of survey participants, 55%, said they download one to five white papers each month, but more than 40% said they download six or more. Survey responses projected an overall average of 6.5 white papers downloaded each month.

Chart A: White papers downloaded each month



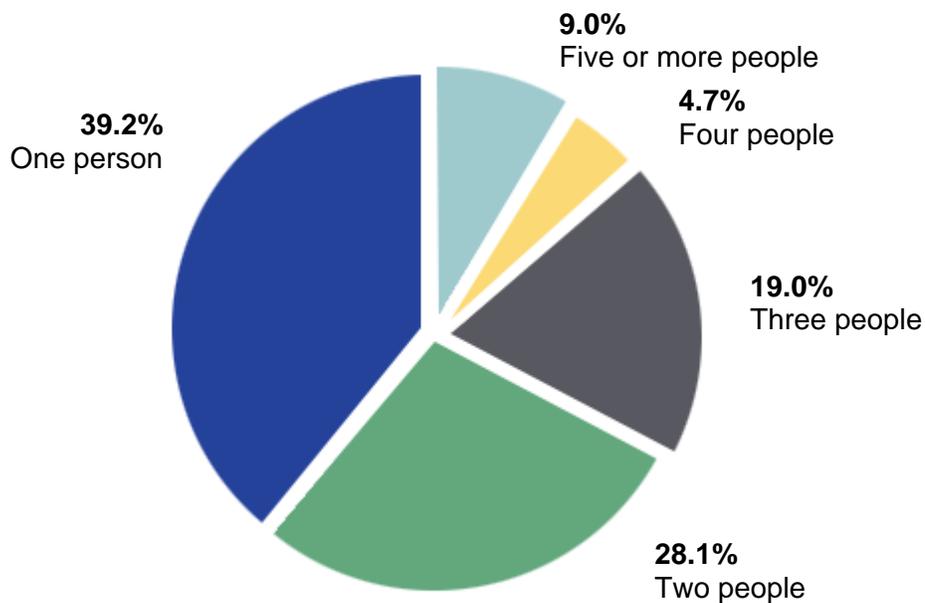
The survey also asked participants how many white papers they are likely to download while making a specific purchasing decision. The majority, 52%, said one to three white papers, while 31% said four to six and 13% said six or more. Survey responses projected an overall average of 3.6 white papers downloaded for each purchase decision.

Chart B: White papers downloaded while making a purchase decision



Although these responses indicated the volume of white papers downloaded by survey participants, the study indicated a “pass around” factor that seems to double the number of white papers read as a result of the downloading activity. More than 60% of participants said that more than one person (including them) typically reads each white paper they download. And half of those people who pass white papers on to other readers said that three or more people read each white paper they download. According to the survey data, an average of 2.2 people read every white paper that is downloaded.

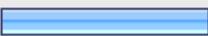
Chart C: Number of people who typically read each white paper



Actions Taken as a Result of Reading White Papers

This tendency to forward white papers to other readers was reinforced by responses when participants were asked what actions they typically took as a result of reading a white paper. The most common answers were “Forward it to my staff” (55%) and “Forward to my superior” (43%). A close third was “Contact the vendor who published it for more information” (38%).

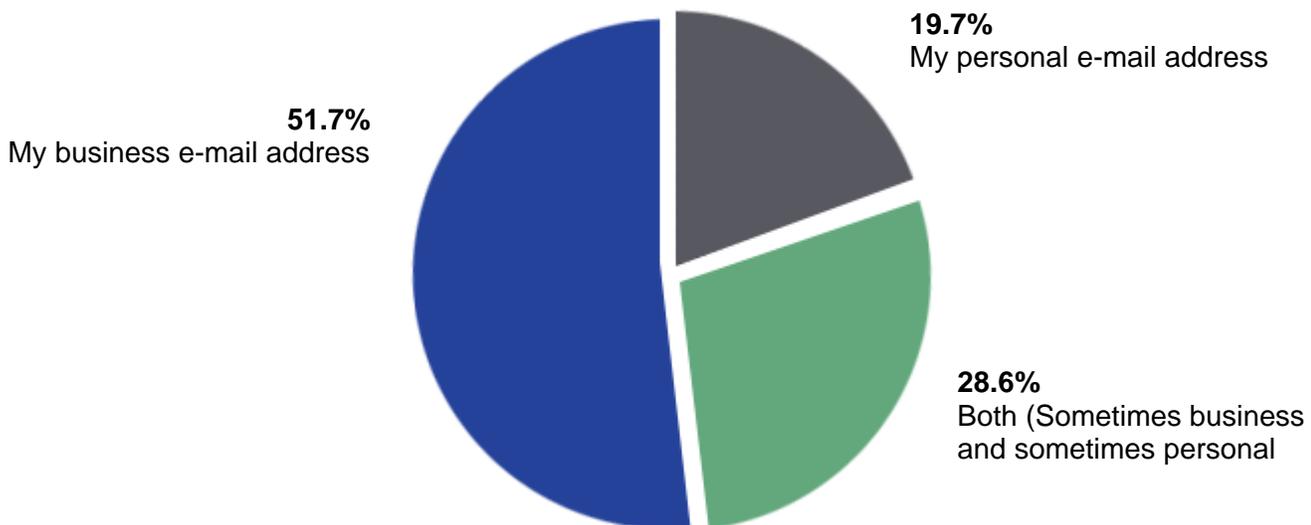
Chart D: Actions taken as a result of downloading white papers

Forward to my superior		43.1%
Forward it to my staff		55.2%
Forward to the IT department (if you are not in IT)		16.6%
Consider making purchase from the vendor who provided the white paper		32.2%
Contact the vendor who published it for more information		37.8%
Contact vendor to start the purchase process		6.1%

E-mail Addresses Used when Registering for White Papers

In another question pertaining to white-paper-related behavior, the survey asked participants which e-mail address they use when registering to download white papers for business use: business, personal or both. Nearly one half said they use personal e-mail addresses all or some of the time, indicating that vendors should not discount leads registered with common personal e-mail domains such as yahoo.com, hotmail.com and gmail.com.

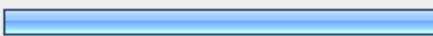
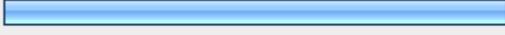
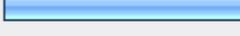
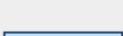
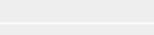
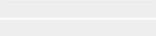
Chart E: Types of e-mail addresses used when registering to download white papers



White Papers and the Purchasing Process

The fact that individuals who download white papers tend to share them with others in their organization and use them as the basis for contacting vendors suggests that white papers play an important role in the purchasing process. This relationship was further explored in a question that asked at what stages in the purchasing process participants tend to read white papers. This question utilized a purchasing-cycle framework put forward by John Coe in *The Fundamentals of Business-to-Business Sales & Marketing* (McGraw Hill, 2003). Chart F shows the results of this survey question.

Chart F: When white papers are read during purchase cycle

Need awareness and definition		76.6%
Vendor identification		37.9%
Information gathering		89.2%
Vendor evaluation/initial selection		42.0%
Request for proposal (RFP) or quote (RFQ)		24.4%
Narrowing of vendor's choices		33.0%
Demonstration/presentation by vendor(s)		20.5%
Reference checking		26.3%
Vendor selection		26.7%
Negotiation		11.3%
Purchase		10.7%

The two most popular answers by far were the early purchase-cycle stages of “Need awareness and definition” and “Information gathering,” suggesting that white papers provide vendors with an opportunity to make potential customers aware of their products and services near the beginning of the process. At these early stages, the opportunity goes beyond building brand awareness: It provides an opportunity to help shape the customer’s perception of the problem and provide a framework into which the vendor’s offering neatly fits as a perfect solution.

Although white papers are especially popular sources of information at key early stages of the purchase cycle, they are also important at later stages when vendor selections are actually taking place. At the middle of the purchase cycle, 42% said they read white papers during “Vendor evaluation/initial selection,” and 33% read them at the “Narrowing of vendor’s choices” stage. Even toward the end of the purchase cycle, 26% read white papers during the “Reference checking” and “Vendor selection” stages.

Decision Making within Organizations

The frequency with which white papers are passed around and their use at various stages of the purchasing cycle begs the question of what roles specific individuals and groups within the organization play in the purchase

process. Participants were asked to rate the decision-making authority or influence of several internal groups when it comes to technology purchases. They rated each group on a 5-point scale: 1 = No Influence, 2 = Some Influence, 3 = Strong Influencer, 4 = Participates in Decision, 5 = Makes Ultimate Decision.

The groups who received the most ratings of “Strong Influencer” or above were IT Management and Executive Management, with 89% and 85%, respectively. Next were IT Staff and Line of Business/Non-IT Departmental Managers, at 72% and 64%. Not surprisingly, Other Staff received the lowest percentage of “Strong Influencer” or above ratings, at 31%.

These strata of decision-making authority remain consistent when looking at the percentage of each group rated at “Participates in Decision” or “Makes Ultimate Decision.” Once again, IT Management and Executive Management were in a virtual tie for the top spot at 72% and 71%, while IT Staff and Non-IT Managers were neck and neck at 37% and 35%. Other Staff again trailed at 14%, but even this group was rated as having “Some Influence” or higher by 80% of survey participants.

Table C: Purchase-making authority or influence of internal groups

Internal group	“Strong Influence” or higher	“Participates in Decision” or higher
IT Management	89%	72%
Executive Management	85%	71%
IT Staff	72%	37%
Line of Business/Non-IT Departmental Managers	64%	35%
Other Staff	31%	14%

These numbers indicate that IT Management and Executive Management have nearly identical decision-making authority when it comes to technology purchases. IT Staff and Non-IT Managers similarly share a level of authority and influence. The combined IT Management/Executive Management group rates well above the IT Staff/Non-IT Manager group in terms of participation in the final purchase decision; but in more than a third of organizations surveyed, IT Staff and Non-IT Managers did participate in those decisions.

What Makes an Effective White Paper?

With so many white papers being downloaded and passed around among various purchase-decision makers and influencers, two important questions arise:

1. What compels an individual to download a specific white paper?
2. What characteristics of a downloaded white paper cause a reader to have a good impression of the content and the vendor who provided it?

When asked to rate the factors important to them when deciding whether to download a white paper (topic, vendor, and third-party source), the topic factor won out. A full 90% said that topic was either “Very Important” or “Extremely Important,” whereas only 22% gave similar responses for the vendor. When it came to a white paper produced by a third-party analyst or consultant, 47% said the source was “Very Important” or “Extremely Important.”

Clearly, a compelling topic is critical to the success of a white paper in terms of attracting downloads. And what types of topics are most attractive? When asked why they typically read white papers, 86% of survey participants selected “To learn more about technology-related business issues,” and 71% chose “To learn technical details

about specific technologies.” Only 55% chose “To learn more about specific products and solutions offered by a vendor.”

The survey also asked participants to rate the importance of specific white-paper elements. They rated each element on a 5-point scale: 1 = Not at All Important, 2 = Not Very Important, 3 = Somewhat Important, 4 = Very Important, 5 = Extremely Important.

The white-paper element most consistently rated “Very Important” or higher was “Clear explanation of business issues,” at 85%. Running a close second was “Research/statistics to back up claims made in white paper,” which was rated at that level by 79% of participants. Echoing the importance of hard facts to support claims made in a white paper was “Attributions/references to credible sources,” rated “Very Important” or higher by 69% of participants.

At the other end of the importance continuum, “Background on a vendor’s product” was the element most consistently ranked at “Somewhat Important” or lower, at 60%. “In-depth technical background” was next at 40%, reinforcing the preference of this audience for business-focused content as compared to highly technical information.

Table D: Importance of white-paper elements

White-paper element	“Very Important” or higher	“Somewhat Important” or lower
In-depth technical background	59%	40%
Clear explanation of relevant business issues	85%	14%
Background on a vendor’s product	39%	60%
Research/statistics to back up claims made in white paper	79%	21%
Attributions/references to credible sources	69%	30%
Graphics/charts that clearly illustrate key points	61%	38%
Layout/design that makes it easy to scan without reading every word	63%	36%

As mentioned earlier, the source of white papers produced by a third party can affect the reader’s impression of a white paper. The third-party source was not as important to readers as the topic when deciding whether to download a white paper, but participants did express a higher perceived value for white papers produced by third parties. Although 77% rated reports written by top-tier analyst firms as being of “High Value” or above, only 26% rated vendor-produced white papers similarly. Reports from “second-tier” analysts were rated as “High Value” or above by 40%, and proprietary research was rated at the same level by 47%.

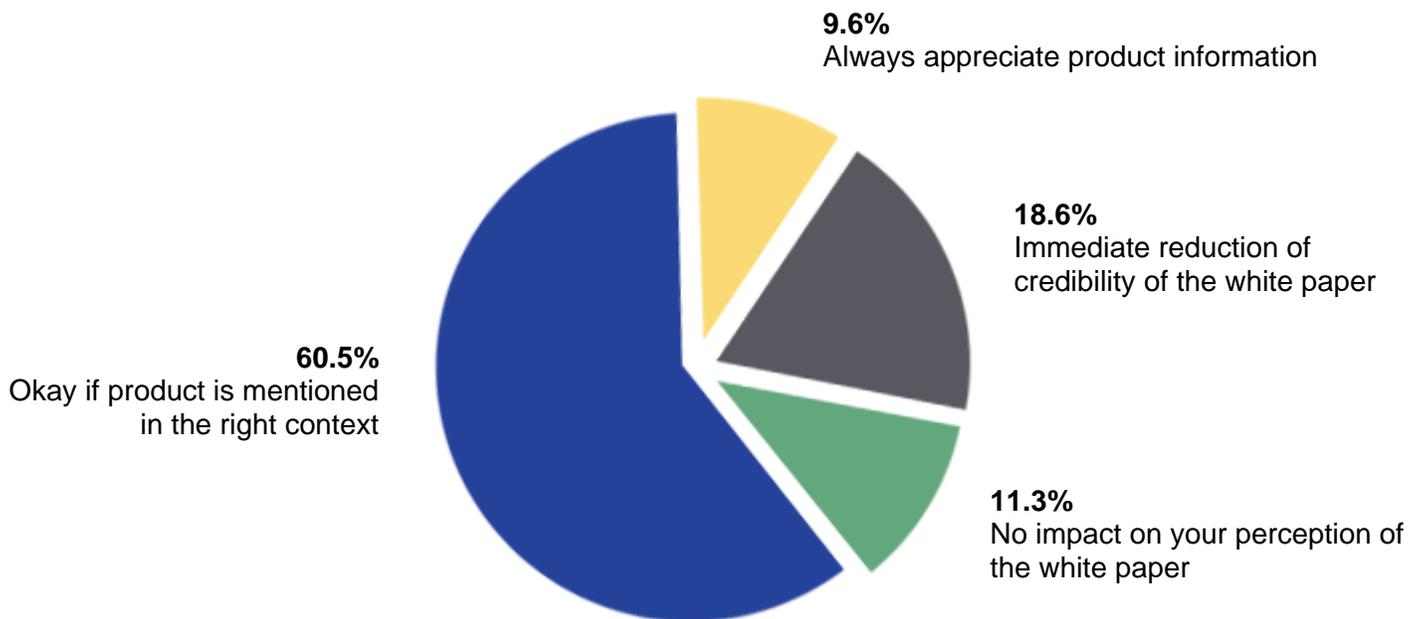
The survey also asked participants what page length they thought was optimum for providing useful information in a white paper without delivering an overwhelming amount of content. “5 to 8 pages” was the top vote getter, with 46%, and “1 to 4 pages” came in second at 33%. This data clearly directs vendors to avoid creating white papers longer than eight pages.

How White-Paper Readers Relate to Vendors

Although product information and technical details may be what readers are looking for least when they download white papers, vendors clearly need to include such information if they hope to realize the branding opportunities inherent in white-paper distribution. The key, according to the survey data, is integrating the marketing message into the useful business-focused content on which the white paper is focused.

The survey asked participants directly, “What is your usual reaction when a specific product or service offered by the vendor that produced a white paper is mentioned in that white paper?” The number-one answer was “OK if product is mentioned in the right context,” which 61% of users selected. And although 11% said that product mentions had no impact on their impression of the white paper, 10% said they “Always appreciate product information.” Only 19% said that a product mention leads to an “Immediate reduction of credibility of the white paper.” The conclusion: a vendor who carefully offers product information in context with the rest of a white paper’s content can assume that they have avoided offending more than 80% of readers.

Chart G: Reactions to mentions of products in white papers



Of course, the whole idea of white-paper distribution is to identify leads with whom the vendor’s sales team can follow up. When and how should such follow-up take place? According to survey participants, sales reps should follow up via e-mail after giving the prospect adequate time to look at the white paper.

In fact, 97% of participants expressed a preference for being contacted via e-mail, while only 3% chose phone contact. And only 9% said they wanted to be contacted by the vendor either the same day they download a white paper or the day after. 41% preferred to be contacted sometime during the week after they downloaded the white paper, and 50% said the vendor should wait at least one full week.

Recommendations and Best Practices

The survey data suggests vendors should adopt several best practices if they want their white papers to attract the attention of business technology decision makers and leave readers with the best impression possible of the vendors:

- Make sure each white paper has an appealing, business-focused topic and that the topic is clearly communicated in the title.
- Keep white papers to a length of eight pages or less.
- When mentions of specific products occur in white papers, make sure they are in the proper context with the topic-focused discussion of the content.
- Remember that not all business technology decision makers have a highly technical background; don't make white papers too technical.
- Have third parties with established brands as information sources produce white papers, to leverage audience respect for these content providers and increase response.
- Make sure the sales team follows up with white-paper-generated leads a few days after they have downloaded the white paper. Precede any phone contacts with introductory e-mails.
- Be prepared to stay in touch with leads over a period of time, because many of them may be early in their purchasing cycle.
- Identify leads who are later in their purchasing cycle so they can be worked more aggressively by the sales team.

Conclusion

The success of a white paper as a technology marketing asset depends on the document's appeal to the target audience, its delivery of useful information about a topic important that audience, and the positive impression it leaves regarding the vendor and its products. The results of this study suggest that to attract and impress technology decision makers with the desirable demographic characteristics of the IT Business Edge audience, the optimum white paper will have a business-focused topic, run no longer than eight pages, and cite reliable sources or hard data supporting the points it makes. And readers do not mind if the vendor works in its marketing message along the way, as long as product information appears in an appropriate context beside the more broadly useful content delivered in the white paper.

About IT Business Edge

IT Business Edge delivers the information, analysis and context business technology decision makers need to maximize returns on IT investments and align IT initiatives with business objectives. As a Technology Intelligence Agent, IT Business Edge provides content different from that of a traditional IT publisher, news service or analyst firm. Our editors monitor all these sources — plus many others — for critical IT information that they translate into actionable advice for high-level IT and business managers. Subscribers access our practical content and useful decision-making tools through a rich Website, targeted e-mail newsletters, and varied RSS feeds. All these outlets feature our business-focused blogs, exclusive interviews with field experts and industry insiders, plus our database of more than 20,000 abstracts summarizing content from 2,500-plus sources. Visit our website at: <http://www.itbusinessedge.com>.