

line up as a subject matter expert (SME) and all the material you need to gather comes from inside the company — most likely from the team that designed and created the product or service in the first place. When you speak to those experts, they'll tell you about what they know best: the features, functions, philosophy, and benefits of the offering they just created. In a short time, they can dish out more source materials, including all sorts of market research, slide decks, product plans, and use cases about that offering, than you can possibly use.

For a background, you won't likely have to do any web searching, compile any external research, or keep track of any footnotes. Of course, you still have to gather the facts you need to present the offering in a compelling way, but your research should be clear and straightforward. That makes a background the easiest of any flavor to research.

Pro: Easy to write

A background can be quite easy to write because it has a simple structure and a tight focus. The structure of a background is pretty straightforward:

- ✓ Here's the offering.
- ✓ Here are the key features.
- ✓ Here's how these features can benefit you.
- ✓ Call us if you want to talk.

You may want to do an entire background about one specific aspect of an offering, such as security, robustness, total cost of ownership, or whatever. In this case, you can arrange the list of features into some sort of logical pattern so that each one builds on what you discuss earlier in the paper.

Or a background can take the opposite approach with a modular structure. With this approach, when you cover four discrete features and their benefits, you don't have to link them all together into a grand design, with each point following logically from the one before; you can just talk about one, another one, the next, and then the last.

With either approach, you should arrange your points in logical order, starting and ending your list with strong, memorable features. If you have one or two less-exciting features, tuck those into the middle to de-emphasize them. Beyond that, there's no trick to writing a background. Just stick to the facts and explain the offering in clear terms.

Con: Short-lived

Of course, any document tied so intimately to a specific product has a limited shelf life, roughly equivalent to the life span of that release, version, or model. As soon as the product or service changes or gets an update, the white paper may be out of date. At that point, long after the initial excitement of the launch, justifying the resources to update and rerelease that white paper may not be easy. You may have more interesting marketing tactics that you can use to promote the new version of the product, especially if it's now at a mature point in its lifecycle or no longer considered different or unconventional. You may as well expect a background used at a product launch to have a short life span, about as long as that product generates any initial buzz. After that, it may be time for that document to go to that big recycling box in the sky.

Con: Not good for generating leads

Using a background can be tempting in certain situations where it's not the wisest choice, such as when trying to generate leads. Some sales and marketing people may be tempted to say, "If we just tell people how great our technology is, they'll want to buy it!" But this flawed thinking doesn't match how most B2B buyers operate in the real world.

In fact, using a background to generate leads is like dipping into an almost empty tub of ice cream: You're just not going to come up with much. The only prospects likely to encounter a background are the ones already exploring your offering by name. Whenever I interview executives from white paper content networks, like KnowledgeStorm or TechTarget, they confirm that mentioning a product name in a white paper title dramatically cuts downloads, generally by 50 percent or more. That's because most prospects aren't looking for this flavor of white paper. They know backgrounds are completely focused on the nitty-gritty details of one specific product, not on an overview of the particular business problem they're grappling with. And they know any white paper with a product name in the title is likely a background.

Think about how B2B buyers actually encounter your white paper. Any prospects low in the sales funnel who already know your product by name and who search on your website for more information may well find your background. But this number touches only a tiny fraction of your universe of possible buyers. What about all the other prospects out there who don't know your product by name or aren't even in your funnel yet?

Many more B2B prospects at the top of the sales funnel search the web for the solution to a nagging problem or for help understanding an issue. Because a background doesn't answer these questions, the majority of your prospects never encounter it in their search engine results and never know it exists. That's why a background just doesn't draw many prospects