

The purpose of the background

You must have a clear goal you want to achieve with your white paper. Do you want to support an evaluation? Train your sales force or channel partners? Knock a competitor off a buyer's shortlist of vendors? Help close sales? Note that "generate leads" isn't on this list because a background isn't the best at attracting new prospects. Your white paper can do one thing, but it can't do everything.

The key features of the offering

List the most unique and powerful features of the offering in some purposeful order, such as from the most important to the least, the most familiar to the least, the newest to oldest, by workflow, or by some other scheme. Don't try to cover everything in one background. You're not creating a specification or manual that provides a definitive list of everything the product can do. Be selective. Four to six features are often plenty.

In fact, some backgrounds are built around a single feature. And some describe a bundle of features related to one function, such as security, workflow, or whatever. Note that you don't have to dig down into the details of any feature at this point; you just need to put together an initial working list of the features you intend to cover in your background.

The key benefits of each feature

Features without benefits have little appeal. Not every reader can visualize how each raw feature can help in his environment. To make your background more persuasive, describe the benefits for every key feature slanted toward your target audience(s). One way to make benefits clear is to introduce a running example, perhaps a fictitious company like Acme Scanners, as I do in this book. For enterprise software, you can even show dummy data from Acme in every screenshot.

The call to action at the end

What do you want your ideal readers to do after they read your document? Don't simply send people to your home page to wander aimlessly. Instead, send them to a specific landing page. Point them to a short presentation or demo. Invite them to use an interactive calculator. Have them call a toll-free number or request a free trial. In general, the more specific the call to action, the more effective it will be and the easier it is to measure the results.

Allocating pages

This section describes the typical contents most often included in a background in the recommended order. As shown in Figure 6-1, a background is typically eight or more pages, not counting an optional cover and executive summary. A background can even run 25 or 30 pages without losing