



# Creating a Strong Lead Generation Offer

An Action Plan for Marketing Managers

# 1

## Defining Strong

The stronger your offer, the more effective your lead generation marketing campaigns will be. Obvious, right?

But how do we define *strong offer*? Is it one that attracts more leads overall, or brings in immediate sales, or fills your pipeline with long-term prospects?

The right answer depends on your specific situation. You may have plenty of leads, yet struggle to nurture them through your pipeline and convert them into sales. Or maybe you're great at turning leads into customers, yet still fail to reach your revenue goals because you just don't have enough leads to begin with.

Different challenges with no singular definition of strong offer to solve them both. No silver bullet that generates a high response rate from new leads while at the same time helping to convert more of those leads into paying customers.

We need to redefine *strong offer*, not as a single resource, but as a set of tools. A series of separate, targeted offers based on who you're trying to influence and how your product/service relates to their immediate needs.

With that perspective, *strong offer* can be defined as...

*Highly targeted solutions to an important problem that reach prospects at the right stage of their buying cycle.*

So how do you create strong offers that reach your prospects with exactly what they want, exactly when they want it?

You start by understanding the two main categories of offers (hard, soft) and how each can be used to design a comprehensive marketing funnel that mirrors your market's buying cycle.

“A whopping 68% of B2B organizations have not identified their funnel.”  
*MarketingSherpa*

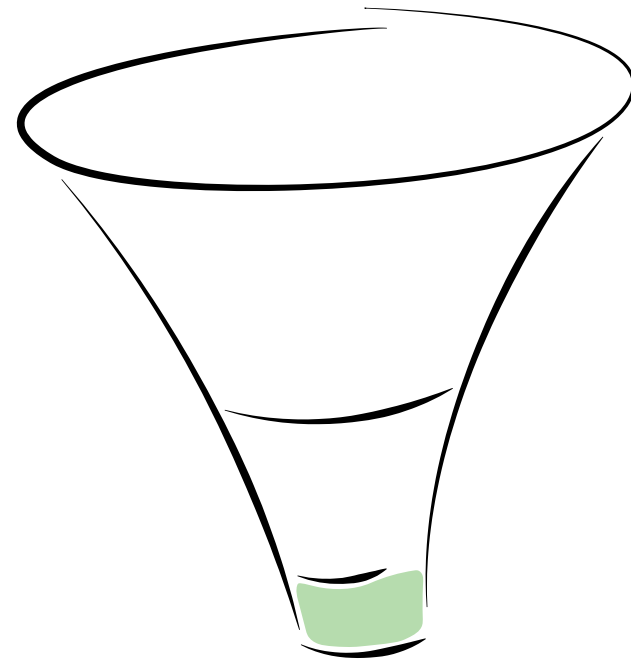
# The Hard Offer

*Buy now! Contact us for a consultation. Click here to start your free trial.*

Hard offers are great for converting ready-to-buy prospects into paying customers. Little wonder they are the offer of choice for sales teams under pressure to deliver quick results. When you have to hit this month's goal, the hard offer is probably the only one you'll consider using. After all, why worry about generating leads that may turn into sales six months from now, when your job depends on you hitting your numbers today?

But while the hard offer may net us a few quick wins, the trade-off is fewer leads overall. Consultations and free trials only attract a small percentage of your potential market—people looking to buy right now. And while scooping up these sales-ready prospects is critical, a strategy that relies exclusively on hard offers disregards the majority of your market.

You'll be irrelevant to the large segment of potential customers in the earlier stages of the buying cycle—people who may really need your solution, but who may not be ready to buy just yet.



# The Soft Offer

Soft offers like ebooks and white papers attract a much wider range of prospects. They appeal to the needs of the largest number of potential customers, those toward the top of the marketing funnel, by offering a broader range of solutions and value.

Soft offers help identify quality prospects not by their desire to buy right now, but by the fact that they suffer from problems similar to those your products/services solve. Compared to the numbers of ready-to-buy customers, the bulk of your future business will inhabit that early part of the buying cycle—people and companies just becoming aware of a specific challenge, just beginning to search for solutions, just realizing that your products and services even exist.

Strong soft offers are the value you create for prospects before they become paying customers. They are how you build trust, credibility and connections with your market. They're the

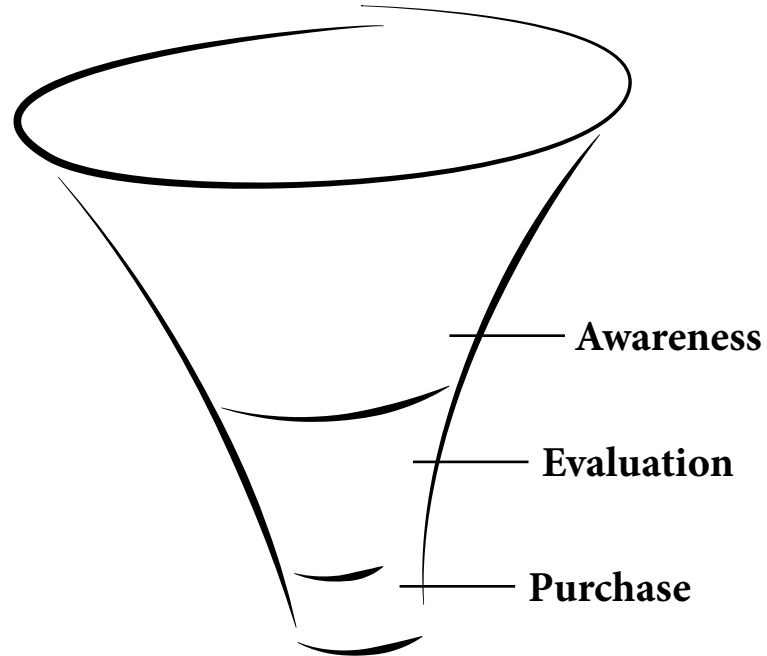
foundation of a marketing funnel that mirrors the buying cycle of your prospects and helps you nurture more leads into customers.



# 2

## The Buying Cycle

The effectiveness of hard or soft offers comes down to where your prospects are within the 3 stages of the buying cycle.



## Stage 1: Awareness

The **Awareness** stage is at the very top of the buying cycle, when someone first recognizes a particular challenge. Something is gnawing at them or making their lives difficult. Maybe it's a specific problem or maybe something just seems off, like things aren't as they should be.

*Our follow-up system is a mess.  
Managing payroll is giving me a headache.  
Our website looks so...2005.*

Where once they were happily oblivious to the issue, they suddenly find themselves plagued by it. Their internal radar tunes in to potential solutions. They have far more questions than answers at this point, and may be a few steps away from investing real effort or money into the solution. But they are willing to spend some time learning about the challenge, their options, and what they should do next. They're not necessarily ready to buy, but they are ready to learn.

A strong offer at this stage should educate prospects about their problem and its potential solutions. You're selling insight, not products and services.



## Stage 2: Evaluation

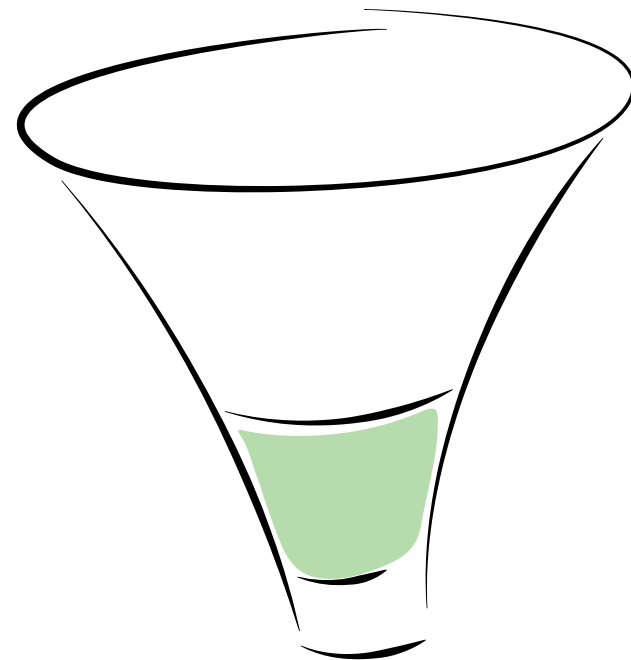
By the **Evaluation** stage, prospects are fully aware of the problem and are starting to explore potential solutions. They're comparing companies, products and services against the cost of ignoring the problem altogether if the solutions available prove to be too expensive or time-consuming.

*Which product makes the most sense for us?*

*Can we afford it?*

*How does it work? What exactly will it do?*

Though they may be open to receiving a brochure or even setting up a conversation with a salesperson, the strongest offer at this stage is content that shares the details of your specific solution and how it will help them get what they really want, without the potential pressure that comes with a sales call.



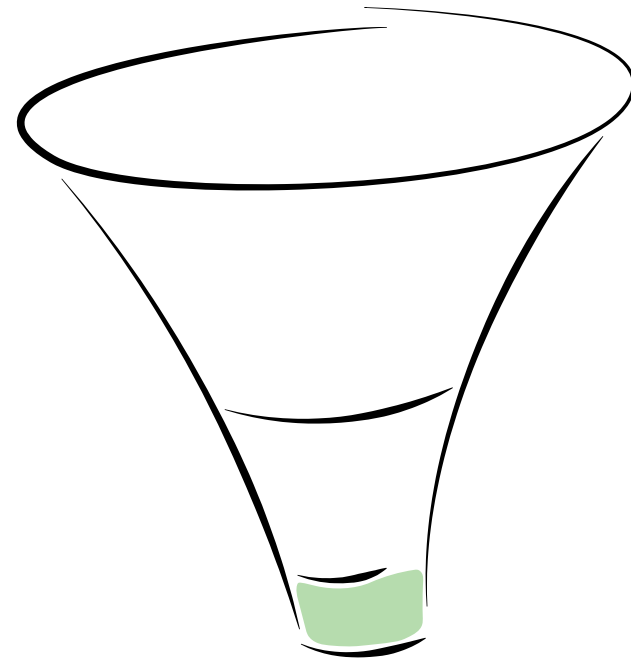


## Stage 3: Purchase

If they reach the **Purchase** stage, your prospects have made a decision to take action and choose a solution to their problem. They may still want to compare terms, narrow down technical options, or take a trial run. But they've decided to move forward—it's just a question of how.

While soft offers work best for the **Awareness** and **Evaluation** stages of the buying cycle, a hard offer (a conversation with a salesperson, a free trial membership, a product demonstration) is the most appropriate for the **Purchase** stage.

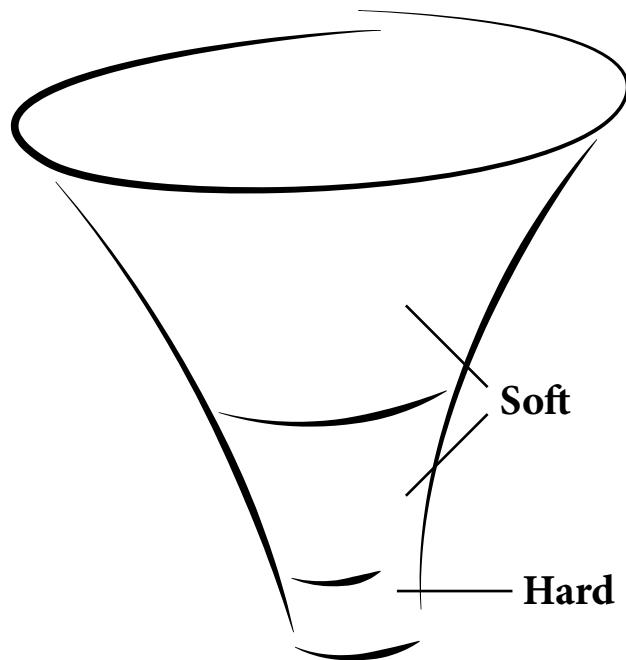
Whichever call to action you choose, it must offer value in and of itself. A sales call gives the prospect the chance to ask lots of questions and customize the product exactly to their needs. A free trial gives them a chance to test drive the software before making any long-term commitments. A product demonstration lets them see it in action.



## Soft Offers to Hard Offers

Since your prospects will be in different stages of the buying cycle at any one point in time, the strongest lead generation offer is neither soft or hard, but a combination of both.

Content-based soft offers cover the **Awareness** and **Evaluation** stages, while the 'Buy Now!' hard offers cover the final **Purchase** stage.



Of course, creating content for soft offers takes effort and commitment on your part. It requires a long-term mindset, the desire to nurture leads through the marketing funnel, and the willingness to focus on both short-term goals and the health of your long-term sales pipeline. But the results are worth it.

**Increase your response rate:** Soft offers outpull hard offers because they appeal to more prospects at different stages of the buying cycle.

**Qualify more leads:** Soft offers help you connect with prospects who have the problem your products and services solve.

**Convert more leads into sales:** Engaging and insightful content helps nurture more leads through to the bottom of your marketing funnel.

# 3

## Where to Start

More than likely, you've already got the hard offer covered. You have a sales team eager to go on calls, an easy way to purchase your product online, or a free trial option in place.

If anything, it's the content-based soft offers that require your immediate attention. You need more leads, or too many leads go cold, never reaching the **Purchase** stage and converting into sales. Maybe it's both.

Either way, you need offers that appeal to the early stages of the buying cycle.

You need great content.

Ebooks, white papers, brochures, slide decks, webinars, newsletters—which do you choose?

While all of these content marketing formats can help you build an audience and generate leads, ebooks and white papers have specific advantages that make them ideal soft offers.

**Comprehensive:** They can be made as in-depth and detailed as necessary, depending on your topic and target market.

**Convenient:** They can be downloaded instantly and read anywhere.

**Specific:** They can be focused on one targeted, relevant topic.

Should you still bother with other types of content marketing? Absolutely. It's not a question of either-or, but of which to focus on first. A good ebook or white paper will not only serve as a lead generation offer, but can also provide plenty of raw material for additional blog posts, newsletter articles, slide decks and webinars.

But what exactly is the difference between an ebook and a white paper? At first glance they may appear to be the same thing—a well designed, well researched informational document. And as marketers continue to innovate and experiment with these types of content offers, the line between them becomes more blurred. That said, there are some differences to be aware of before picking one over the other.

## Similarities

**Targeted:** They both appeal to specific prospects by offering solutions that relate to your products/services.

**Informative:** They both help people understand a problem and how to overcome it.

**Visual:** They both need to be well designed and may contain graphics as well as text.

**Authoritative:** They both require some level of expertise and/or facts from credible sources.

**Persuasive:** They both use logical arguments to help readers make better decisions.

**Convenient:** They can both be delivered instantly by PDF.

**Engaging:** They should both be easy to read or skim relatively quickly.

## Differences

### Formality

- White papers tend to be more conservative.
- Ebooks tend to be more conversational.

### Length

- White papers tend to be 6-10 pages in portrait layout.
- Ebooks tend to run anywhere from 10 to over 100 pages in landscape layout.

### Audience

- Traditional white papers were highly technical documents written for subject matter experts.
- Ebooks are more widely used to help simplify concepts for non-experts.

So should you create an ebook or a white paper? It really comes down to the personality of your brand and the preferences of your audience.



Consider a white paper if your target market leans toward the conservative. Your prospects may prefer formal white papers, dismissing lighter or more visual ebooks as “unprofessional.”

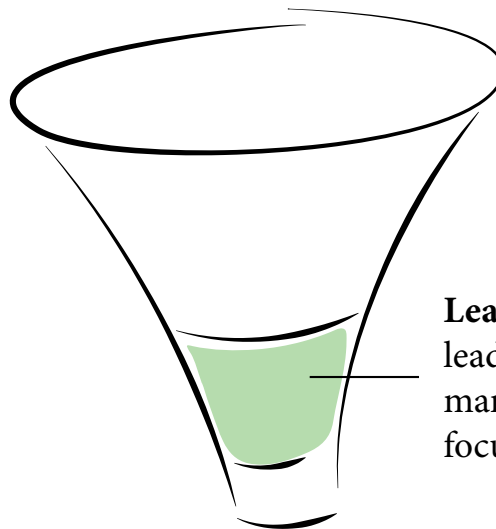
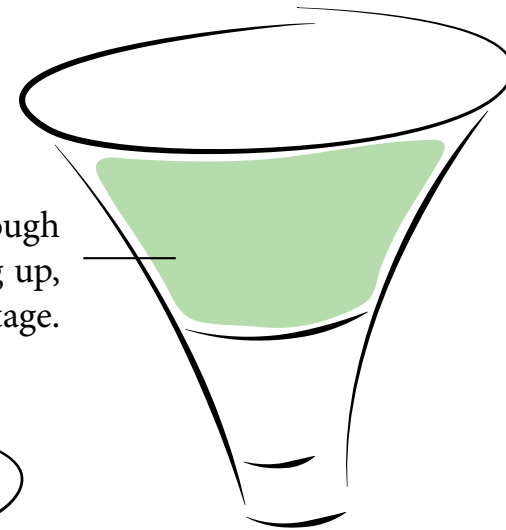
Go with an ebook if your marketing voice is more personable. A target market that responds well to your accessible style may consider white papers old-fashioned and boring.

# 4

## Types of Ebooks and White Papers

What should your ebook or white paper be about? It depends on which stage of the buying cycle you need to focus on first. Ideally you'll want to create soft offers covering both the **Awareness** and **Evaluation** stages of the buying cycle. But which one makes more sense to start with depends on identifying your most urgent marketing goal.

**Lead generation:** If you are not attracting enough new leads and your marketing funnel is drying up, focus on targeting prospects in the **Awareness** stage.



**Lead nurturing:** If you are attracting enough new leads, but few of them are making it through the marketing funnel and converting into customers, focus on targeting the **Evaluation** stage.

There are 3 general categories of ebooks/white papers to choose from, depending on which stage of the buying cycle you're targeting: the Problem/Solution, the How To, and the Backgrounder.

The Problem/Solution is a “factual discussion of a major problem...it considers the scope of the problem, describes the existing solutions and their drawbacks, and recommends a new, improved solution for best results.”<sup>1</sup>

*Changes in California Employment Law that Affect Your Hiring Practices*

*New Security Threats to Your Payment Processing System*

*How SaaS is Changing Your Industry's Business Model*



Problem/Solution offers appeal to prospects in the **Awareness** stage by identifying their challenges and offering ways to overcome them. They're not about your company or your products and services. They're about sharing insights and options.

The Problem/Solution offer is about helping your market to better understand the challenges they face.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Graham, <http://www.thatwhitepaperguy.com>



How To offers are actionable, step-by-step guides designed to help people learn a new technique, master a process, or get something done. If Problem/Solution offers are about understanding the big picture, How To offers are about teaching what to do, how to do it, and when.

*7 Ways to Use CRM Software to Attract More Clients*

*How to Set Up a Foolproof Customer Complaint Response Plan*

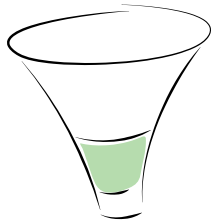
*3 Questions to Ask Your Next Job Candidate Before Making a Hiring Decision*



Like the Problem/Solution, How To offers work best for targeting prospects in the **Awareness** stage.

Both Problem/Solution and How To offers are about educating, not selling.

The Backgrounder “focuses on the features, functions, benefits, and payback of a product or service from one vendor.”<sup>1</sup>



A Backgrounder is best for targeting prospects in the **Evaluation** stage, people looking for specific information to help them decide between vendors, products and services. Backgrounders help reduce sales resistance by providing facts, data, specifications and details in a way that’s relevant to potential customers. Unlike a brochure, a Backgrounder goes beyond basic features or benefits. Instead, it can cover the technical aspects of your solution, how it’s best used, how to set it up, and its most important functions.

A Backgrounder is not just a brochure. It should give prospects the level of detailed information they require to help them make a good decision.

*Setting Up (Product) to...*

*7 Ways (Product) Solves...*

*How (Industry) Uses (Product) to Reduce...*

While the goal of any ebook/white paper is to educate prospects about the challenges they face, the Backgrounder focuses on your product or service as the solution to that problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Graham, <http://www.thatwhitepaperguy.com>

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## What to Write About

When you approach your lead generation offers based on buying stages and content types, you'll notice a pattern of the subject matter moving from broad to specific.

A Problem/Solution or How To offer targeting the **Awareness** stage is going to tackle the bigger picture—a broader range of topics that relate to the problems your company solves. A Backgrounder targeting the **Evaluation** stage is going to home in on a narrower topic (the specific problems your product/service solves) with a specific solution (your product/service).



The key to identifying the right topics is to first define the exact problems your products/services solve. This sounds easy, but understanding these problems from a customer's perspective can be tricky.

Many companies identify their USP with vague descriptions of a solution, often hidden behind a thick coat of marketing-speak.

*We help small companies leverage their human capital by discovering the synergy between the corporate mission and the goals of their front line employees.*

When asked to translate a statement like this into actual topics, they usually end up with meaningless variations of that same solution-driven mission statement.

*How to discover the synergy between your corporate mission and the goals of your front line employees.*

The problem with a topic like this is that it lacks context. As they are bombarded with thousands of marketing messages daily, how likely is it that prospects will connect your solution (leveraging human capital) to the problem as they see it (our front desk staff doesn't seem to give a damn about our customers)?

Building your offer around your solution, as opposed to their problem, can make it extremely challenging to come up with topics that prospects will respond to. Great content offers are never about your company and its mission statement. They are about your customers' pain.

To accurately define the problems you solve, start with your mission statement, benefits and USP, then work backwards to the root problems they solve.

1. Describe your solution as you normally would in your marketing or on a sales call.

*We create accounting software that helps small business owners handle the increasingly complex task of accurately managing payroll, taxes, expenses and receivables.*

2. What real-world, direct problems does your product or service solve? Express these problems from their point of view, without any marketing-speak or puffery.

*Accurately managing the finances of a small business is really hard and it's driving me crazy. I hate it and I don't want to do it anymore.*

3. Identify the root problem, the primary challenge that your customers are trying to overcome.

*Our business is becoming much more complex as we grow, making it really hard to manage all of the moving parts.*

4. Identify additional challenges that relate to that root problem.

*Taxes are complicated, employment laws are hard to keep up with, time is short, costs are up, we're spending too much on lawyers, too few people are trying to fill too many roles.*

5. What are the unintended side effects of existing solutions that have prevented some prospects from using them until now? Express these from their point of view.

*I'd love to find good accounting software, but they all seem overly-complex and will probably take up too much of my time to figure out how to use.*

# Converting Problems into Topics

While most of the problems you solve will relate to your product or service in some way, not all of them will make good offer topics. You still need to refine your list and identify those problems that relate best to your overall strategy.

## 1. What stage are you targeting?

For targeting the **Awareness** stage with Problem/Solution or How To offers, focus on broader topics that affect your market but still relate to the root problem your product/service helps to solve.

For targeting the **Evaluation** stage with a Backgrounder, you'll want to narrow your options to the direct problems your product/service solves.

The higher up your target audience is in the marketing funnel, the broader the scope of problems your offer can relate to.

## 2. What problems affect your most important target markets?

Who's your ideal customer?

*Companies with 500+ employees*

*Managers struggling with new technologies*

*Clients willing to pay extra for on-site technical support*

These customer types represent your sweet spot. They're the clients who produce the highest profit margins or for whom you have the greatest competitive advantage. They're the future.

It makes sense then to focus on the problems and topics that matter to these ideal customers, rather than waste resources catering to less lucrative market niches.

## 3. Which problems are underrepresented?

It makes no sense addressing a problem in a way that has already been covered by your competition. Contributing more to the conversation isn't going to add any real value or attract many leads. Focus instead on drilling down, of finding ways to take a generic topic and make it highly specific to your market.

*How to create engaging content becomes What automobile dealership owners really want to learn from your next webinar.*

# Share



## How I Can Help

I specialize in writing concise, persuasive copy to help you attract more inbound leads and nurture them through your marketing funnel. Projects include ebooks, white papers, web pages, sales letters and email marketing campaigns.

To discuss a copywriting project, please email me at [marcus@marcusschaller.com](mailto:marcus@marcusschaller.com) with a brief description of your campaign.

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