

How Your Investment in Documentation Improves Your Bottom Line

What makes good documentation?

All programs strive for perfection. According to most developers and users of software, perfection is achieved when an individual can efficiently use a program without consulting documentation, or when the documentation is so seamlessly blended with the interface that the software becomes intuitive to users at all levels. Documentation can be designed to complement and support this philosophy. It can also ignore this principle and provide nothing but confusion and frustration for the customer.

The purpose of documentation, according to writers and other professionals who create it, is to provide users with a logical way to understand the purpose and uses of the given product. Documentation also outlines the recommended steps a user can follow to learn beginning, intermediate, and advanced functions of the product.

According to those who develop usable documentation, strong support for the documentation process must come from the management team responsible for building the product. However, that support is not always present. Many technical communicators work under conditions that give them the impression that documentation is a very low, if not the last, priority.

A history of the documentation process

In the early days of the computer industry, responsibility for writing the documentation was left to the software and hardware programmers and developers. These highly trained technical people typically wrote documentation targeted for themselves as the primary audience. They didn't take what are now referred to as *human factors* into account. The writers weren't end users (the public/audience expected to buy and use the product), and they didn't understand the needs of these less experienced consumers. Since companies didn't understand or try to learn about the needs of non-technical users, they frequently released software and equipment with documentation the customers couldn't comprehend.

After their first, usually futile, attempts to follow instructions written by these programmers and developers, customers found it necessary to call technical support for help. This is a logical outcome, since a majority of the new users had little training in developing software or designing systems. Companies deduced that because the new customers called technical support for help, it was obvious that no one read the manuals. Since they didn't take the time to analyze the reasons behind this trend, the assumption that documentation wasn't necessary became common.

A decade later, Apple® Computer experienced resounding success with a revolutionary marketing strategy. They decided to market the Macintosh® by telling users that they could teach themselves the essentials of using a computer. Apple eliminated much of the difficulty consumers had experienced owning personal computers (PCs) with DOS®-based operating systems. They replaced the ongoing frustration with the simplified and well-thought-out Macintosh computer, including a “friendly” user interface and a well-received tutorial approach to the basics of operating the new Macintosh. Apple became a driving force in the marketplace and set a high standard for the PC market. To this day, Apple still promotes the broad concept of easy installation to encourage consumer acceptance and use, by:

- eliminating technical expertise as a requirement for ownership.
- minimizing the customer’s need to do anything more than basic computing with the Macintosh computer.
- marketing the new iMac™ network PC as a two-step plug-in process that anyone (child or adult) can accomplish in minutes.

In addition, Apple’s documentation is recognized around the world for its excellence, and they allocate much of their budget to the design and usability of their documentation.

While consumers are able to use an Apple computer, it is a fallacy to assume that anyone can easily learn to use most of the functionality available in most computer hardware and software. If this assertion were true, there would be no need for technical-support departments. We realize, however, that the complexity of the products offered today is the reason for the continued need for good technical documentation for both hardware and software.

Many companies don’t understand how much their documentation, or lack thereof, can affect their reputation, and their sales figures. Here are a few examples.

Market share can be influenced by the documentation

At the outset of desktop publishing (DTP) for the Macintosh market, PageMaker® from Adobe was the only viable, available option for high-level production needs for about two years. Everyone used it, but there were major problems with it. PageMaker was extremely unstable, and came with documentation that was difficult to understand.

With the release of QuarkXPress™ by Quark, Inc., users not only experienced a level of functionality that greatly surpassed PageMaker, but also had the benefit of excellent documentation, which made the product easier to learn. As soon as QuarkXPress was reviewed and became available to the DTP audience, PageMaker’s market share dropped to 20 percent, after holding a steady 80 percent of the market share for the two years it had been the only option available. As of 1998, PageMaker’s market share still remains at 20 percent. QuarkXPress commands 60 percent in the same category.

Ashton-Tate is another example of the effect of good documentation that boosts a product’s profile. They developed a groundbreaking, initially very popular database product called dBaseIII. At the time of introduction, it was the only software of its kind. While innovative, the product was released with poor documentation and, as a result, was very difficult to learn and use.

With the release of Lotus® 1-2-3 from Lotus Development Corporation, with its crisp documentation and excellent user interface, the public's reaction was similar to what occurred at the introduction of Windows® 95. Lotus far surpassed Ashton-Tate in reputation and in sales since the release of Lotus® 1-2-3. Its usable documentation contributes to its domination of the professional financial database market.

Microsoft Money, a personal-finance software product, has never come close to the market share Intuit's Quicken® enjoys. Quicken is justifiably popular for its built-in interactive documentation and very comprehensive print documentation. Quicken sells six times the units of Microsoft Money®, even though Quicken is more expensive. Microsoft Money doesn't provide a comparable level of user support and documentation to that of Quicken, even though Microsoft is a much larger company with top market share in office software products and a reputation for acceptable documentation. Intuit is a small company in the Bay Area's Peninsula region. Its success lies in the company's awareness that good documentation and ease of product use create loyal customers.

Meeting the customer's needs enhances your bottom line

Product survival in the software industry means beating the competition. Your product will be reviewed in industry magazines and in newspapers. It will be evaluated based on ease of use and visual attractiveness. Just as importantly, your documentation will be assessed and compared to what your competitor is offering. If your documentation is better, chances are you'll gain more favorable reviews.

Consumers are frustrated by how difficult it is to learn today's complicated and extensively engineered software. They want clear directions included with their purchase. They will buy your product if the documentation is accessible. The more usable your documentation is, the easier it is to learn the product. The easier it is to learn the product, the more likely the consumer will be inclined to purchase it.

Since the most common way consumers decide to buy a certain software product is to ask for and rely on the recommendations of acquaintances and co-workers, clear documentation is essential. Ease of use is the primary concern of the typical user, and a positive recommendation based on this element can make the difference in a sale.

Seeing documentation as part of the product

An added benefit of creating quality for your product through excellent documentation is a high level of product loyalty. When you issue an upgrade, people will buy it instead of choosing your competition. That sounds like a win-win proposition to us. Underwhelmed has the team, the experience, and the enthusiasm to make sure this scenario proves real (and profitable) to you, our valued customer.