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Corporate

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NINE THINGS YOUR TRANSLATORS
WISH YOU KNEW

TOTAL PRODUCT COMMUNICATION:
YOUR COMPANY IS YOUR PRODUCT

EFFECTIVE OUTLINING: DESIGNING
WORKABLE BLUEPRINTS FOR WRITING

Total Product Communication:

BY JOHN WILSON
Member



Katherine Mahoney/Images.com

Your Company Is Your Product

You are your company's technical publications manager; you just said hello to the corporate communication director in the hallway. Is this the extent of your communication with that person? When was the last time the two of you met to discuss a comprehensive communication strategy for your organization—if ever? Why is it a tacit practice in most technology-based companies to maintain a chasm between the technical communication, marketing communication, and the more exclusive corporate communication departments?

Just how far our work as technical communication managers permeates business processes is something we need to think about, include in our strategy, and convey to decision-makers throughout our organizations.

Meeting with top management and clearly demonstrating ways that technical communication is intrinsic—not only to the product or service, but to the entire business—will elevate your visibility in the company and highlight the added value that your department provides both in cost savings and revenue generation.

Business Functions

Technical communication supports all three major business functions: operations, support, and development. Within the business operations realm, technical communication managers see to it that such things as descriptions and procedures for some of the following

operations are documented correctly and effectively:

- Disaster Recovery/Business Continuity
- System Installations
- System Networks and Databases
- Telecommunication
- Internet/Intranet Operations
- System Backup and Utilities
- System Security
- Standard Operational Quality Checks
- Knowledge Management Practices
- Human Resources Policies and Procedures

The business support area is where technical communication managers and their subordinates need to work with a wide variety of internal and external customers. Areas of coordination include the following:

- Working with product managers and external customers to gather information from beta tests and use it as source material for user guides.
- Cooperating with the corporate communication department to write the technical product sections of the annual report.
- Gathering functional specifications and interviewing engineers for preliminary information and draft review comments.
- Producing technical copy for marketing data sheets and sales training materials.
- Harvesting information from business analysts—such as scope, use cases, and activity diagrams—to help structure documentation delivery.
- Along with quality testers, testing the

product (when possible) against draft versions of documentation.

- Contributing relevant technical information to support a public relations campaign.
- Participating with training and help desk managers to develop not just a “training needs analysis,” but a comprehensive technical information needs analysis. This provides for a solid post-sales information support framework in which knowledge is delivered effectively from initial training to the tutorial, user guide, and reference guide, to help desk troubleshooting information and expert know-how.

Then there's the business development function—with its healthy budgets, tighter deadlines, and, in most cases, a limited vision of how a technical communication manager can contribute to such a fast-paced, revenue-generating side of the business. In addition to learning from and listening to their business development counterparts, technical communication managers and their entire departments need to impart and implement relevant technical communication “best practices.” This enhances marketing communication messages in sales proposals and data sheets, on the Internet, at trade shows, and in Webinars.

But just how do you impart these best practices to a sales and marketing audience? You must take the initiative for arranging a “business-critical” meeting (because it *is* critical) with decision-

makers from engineering, sales and marketing, corporate communication, product development, training, customer service, operations, and other major departments.

You must then demonstrate how effective technical communication can actually help generate sales, and how its value is linked across the business.

The next step is to gain concurrence from the group to create a team of people who represent all relevant major business functions. This team will initiate a pilot, total-product communication project from scratch, working on all aspects of a company product, service, and corporate information—including audience definition, message content, information flows, and how and when information is communicated.

This pilot project can be associated with a low-priority dummy product. The team will meet once a week; the project should take not longer than three months to complete. The key is to work out any project wrinkles, record good practices and mistakes, learn the intricacies of the process, build team relationships, pass valuable project information to the rest of the company, and create a much better product and overall business information delivery process.

Post-Sales Customer Service and Information

You can use the following factors when demonstrating the value that effective technical communication adds across the business:

- The demand for better post-sales customer service, including good technical documentation, has made it a distinguished product feature in today's open-systems, plug-and-play, customer-driven market, where a customer can easily replace your product with a competitor's.
- Poor documentation is directly linked to poor post-sales customer service. If the product is of high quality but tainted by poor supporting documentation, the customer may perceive poor documentation as an actual defect in the *primary product*. The end result is that the customer never realizes the full value the product can provide.

- All of these unnecessary costs to you and your customer—not to mention product image degradation and bad press—can be avoided through well-developed, well-thought-out documentation. The principle justification for good documentation is that having it costs less than not having it. Without it, besides facing the possibility of having to hire more help desk staff and field engineers, or absorbing overtime costs for your support staff, your company will most certainly have to perform a series of damage control procedures for your internal and external business relationships.
- Companies need to budget more time and money to support their products. The first paragraph of your software technical documentation plan template, if you have one, should read as follows:

An essential component of the software quality control function is establishing and maintaining the appropriate scheduling, developing, and testing of documentation ("unstructured" product support information) in parallel with the scheduling, developing, and testing of the associated software ("structured" product functional/operations information) and business development processes.

- The packaging, delivery, and business impact of technical content needs to be carefully considered. Technical documentation should promote comfort, confidence, ease of use, and product satisfaction. Good documentation can not only save money, it can help generate trust and make the sales cycle more efficient. For example, you can shorten the sales cycle by delivering meaningful information to sales prospects early on. Such information empowers prospects to make informed decisions and provides a level of pre-qualification for both the buyer and seller.
- Conversely, poor documentation can be an impediment to the sales effort. When making a customer call, sales representatives wear expensive suits,

comb every hair in place, and pull up to the curb in impressive cars. But have they thought about the product data sheet that stays with the customer when the sales representative is long gone? Is it presentable? Aesthetic? Purposeful? Professional? Accurate? If done well, your marketing support documentation can help generate sales. If not, it can be the sales representative's booby trap.

The Expanding Role of Technical Communication

The expanding role of technical communication has affected business directives and our day-to-day lives at all levels. Now it is possible—and necessary in many cases—for technical communication managers to integrate technical communication with the overall marketing and corporate communication effort, which in turn will impact an all-encompassing "product communication" program.

This program could be the impetus for making your role as technical communication manager more visible. You may need to take on more people and responsibility to reorganize, rename, and consolidate communication departments to support a comprehensive product communication effort.

As a major contributor to the overall product communication effort, technical communication, when integrated with marketing communication and training material, helps pave the way for product roll-out.

As external technical documentation and design, technical communication supports customer services, product tangibles, and software code. As internal technical documentation, it helps make business processes more efficient and manageable. Integrated with public relations initiatives, it helps to uphold business directives in the community.

Technical Communication with Business Impact

Technology, and technological information, has assumed its rightful place in the executive boardroom. The World Wide Web has transformed the way technical communication managers do

business. It's a fact of life that technical communicators must be more involved in and contribute to business functions across the board.

The technical communication team can support an all-encompassing product communication program by providing such items as templates, a company-wide style guide, tools, standards and guidelines, standard buttons, link strategies, image locations, and automated Web pages for content providers. The team should also work with its communication peers to develop a universal communication style guide—and I'm not just speaking of using consistent terminology between departments. Technical, marketing, and corporate communication, along with the product development, training, and help desk departments, must come together to design a "total product communication strategy."

Technical communication managers should lead the way in preparing a con-

tent strategy. A content design, information architecture, testing, production, storage, and distribution process—a comprehensive content management and development system—must be determined and adhered to. To keep the strategy going, a Web steering group can be established to accommodate for future growth and amendments and to keep the business and information strategy useful, realistic, and on track.

Consistent Communication

Ushered in by the growth of the Internet and e-business, the need for a comprehensive and consistent product communication program in the business community has never been more apparent. Bridging the traditional chasm between technical, marketing, and corporate communication, product communication ensures consistency between online and offline communication.

A winning product communication

strategy is conceived, implemented, and managed with the same quality process that's required for primary products and services. Content, and therefore communication, not only sustains a company's image and branding; it's intrinsic to the total product and service offering. If revenue is the lifeblood of an organization, then product communication is its blood flow. ❶

John Wilson, a member of the Boston Chapter STC, coaches students, directs start-ups, and advises multinational corporations. From 1992 to 2001, he was managing director of his own technical communication and training consulting company in England. As a guest lecturer at Oxford University for three years, he taught technical communication seminars and helped develop Web-based courses for the university. John is also a professional voice-over actor, digital media producer, and television producer, writer, and director. You can contact him at voysmith@yahoo.com.