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Designing Usable Technical Documents: Why Bother?

By C. Jansen

Many professionals in the field of technical writing involved in the design of instruction guides, will at some point in their career have experienced some doubt whether their efforts to produce high quality documentation really make sense. Do consumers attach some value to the instruction guides for the products they have purchased? Do they use these documents at all, or are most instruction guides thrown away, together with the packing material of the equipment they come with? Is the general opinion as expressed by Rettig (1991) correct that documentation writers may have difficulty admitting it to themselves, but: "most people don't read documentation"?

Don't people read documentation?

So far, not many studies have been published about the use and importance of instruction guides. One of the few publications that discuss this theme is a British study described in Wright et al. (1982). Patricia Wright and her colleagues asked 44 subjects when they would read all or some of the instructions that come with certain types of products.

On average, the responses seemed to contradict the general opinion that instruction guides are seldom used.

Wright et al. found that their subjects consulted the instruction guide entirely or partially in 74.4% of cases concerning a simple appliance such as an electric iron. For more complex equipment such as VCRs, the outcome was 82.9%. Apart from the perceived complexity of the product, the willingness to read the instruction guide was closely related to the price of the product. The more complex and expensive the product, the greater the chance that the instruction guide would be consulted.

Since this study of the Wright et al. twenty years have passed, and one may wonder if the conclusion that users do attach some importance to the instruction guides still holds. In the last decades, however, this matter has received little attention. Karen Schriver (1997: 209-223) describes a relatively recent study, a survey that was carried out among American consumers in 1995. A total of 201 consumers from the Pittsburgh area were asked, among other things, how often they usually consulted instruction guides, how they responded when something went wrong while using complicated home electronics, and whether they were willing to pay more for products with good instruction guides. For the purpose of this survey, the researchers interviewed consumers as they left electronics stores and video rental shops.

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When deciding whether or not to buy a new product of a certain brand, the consumers' purchasing decision is influenced by their previous experiences with the instruction guides that came by another product of that same brand they bought earlier.

Comparing the attitudes of American and Dutch consumers

As we were interested if Schriver's findings would be replicated at a different point in time and in another country, Stephan Balijon, an MA student in Business Communication at Nijmegen University, and myself decided to conduct a similar survey in the Netherlands by the end of 1999. In addition to the questions asked by Schriver, we also asked our respondents what they thought about the use of English terms in Dutch instruction guides.

At various locations in and around Rotterdam, we asked 201 customers leaving consumer electronics shops if they would be willing to answer a few questions about instruction guides. Respondents were rewarded with a small bag of candy. As in Schriver's study, a more or less equal number of men and women participated in our survey, with roughly equal numbers in various age groups. In terms of level of education, the numbers in the three groups we distinguished, were also more or less equal.

What did we find?

Space does not allow me to discuss our results in detail here. I will confine myself to the general picture that emerged from the analysis of our data. Readers interested in further information are gladly referred to an upcoming comprehensive report of our study, to be published in Document design (2002). There is also a web site where the complete results of our statistical analyses can be found: www.careljansen.nl/jb2001.htm.

In many respects, the general picture that emerged from our study was similar to what Schriver found. Just like the in the US, almost everyone in our study said that they read the instruction guides entirely or partially. In most cases, this is allegedly done quickly while trying out the product, or when people get stuck. When problems arise while trying to use the product, people more often attribute these problems to themselves than to the instruction guide. Respondents believe they are entitled to clearly-written instruction guides. They also see some commercial benefit in stressing the "user-friendliness" of their instruction guides, and they are willing to pay slightly more for a clearly-written instruction guide. Both in the US and in the Netherlands respondents indicated that their purchasing decisions were influenced by their previous experiences with instruction guides. Our Dutch respondents were not enthusiastic about English terms being used in Dutch instruction guides, but generally speaking, they did not consider this a great problem.

As indicated, when comparing our results with what Schriver found, we did not find a large influence of nationality on the attitudes of consumers towards instruction guides. But perhaps other characteristics of the respondents might play a role. Here is what we found.

Gender did not prove to play a part in the use and assessment of instruction guides. There was no question in our survey where the answers from male respondents differed significantly from the answers given by female respondents. Age, however, did have an

effect, for instance on the frequency of use. Older consumers more frequently claim to read the instruction guides when they buy products, and they tend to read the instruction guide from cover-to-cover, while young people only consult the instruction guide when they get stuck, or do not read it at all. There is also a clear age effect concerning opinions about the use of English. Older people are more bothered by the use of English terminology in Dutch instruction guides than younger people are. Level of education also proved to affect the use of instruction guides. People with high levels of education clearly read instruction guides more often and more intensively than others. Consumers with low levels of education are also considerably more negative about the use of English terminology in Dutch instruction guides.

Conclusion

The findings of both Wright and Schriver and ourselves contradict the general opinion that instruction guides would only seldom be used, and that high quality instruction guides would hardly have any commercial value. Consumers state that they do read instruction guides (be it often quickly and only partially), and that when deciding whether or not to buy a new product of a certain brand, their purchasing decision is influenced by their previous experiences with the instruction guides that came by another product of that same brand they bought earlier. Perhaps employers or clients of technical writers might be especially interested in this last outcome. It underlines what technical writers have realised a long time ago: designing usable technical documents does make sense.

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