

Tech Comm Value: Potential Costs of Poor or Missing Documentation

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Causes of Inadequate Technical Documentation

A partial list:

- Limited time to produce documents
- Non-writers responsible for documentation
- Too much influence from Marketing
- Unqualified technical writers
- Poorly designed templates; too strict attention to templates.

In many cases, an underlying source of these causes is management decisions. If you want to fix things, take your case to management.

Potential Consequences of Inadequate Technical Documentation

Unhappy customers. They may complain to their friends (or on the Internet!) about the company or the product. They may not buy your products again.

Lost sales. Either from unhappy customers not repeating, or potential customers choosing a competitor who has better user documentation.

Wasted man-hours. Time spent by employees looking for information is time they are not spending on more profitable tasks. Badly written or poorly organized documentation makes the search longer.

Higher customer service expenses. Providing a manual is cheaper than paying help desk personnel to solve customer problems, or sending engineers to customer sites.

Fines or other penalties imposed by regulatory bodies, either from government or industry. Government agencies can also restrict how your company conducts its business.

TIP: To pass audits from regulatory bodies, make sure you follow documentation guidelines from them *to the letter*.

Product liability lawsuits. The documentation is part of the product, and may be the ultimate source of the injury to the plaintiff.

TIP: To improve your chances of avoiding or winning a lawsuit about product documentation, make sure your documents are at least as good as your competitors'. The plaintiff may compare them in building the case against you. Or you may use the weaker competitor's documents to defend yourself.

Useful Resources

“Consumer Feelings about Product Documentation.” Results of a survey of consumers conducted by Sharon Burton, STC Associate Fellow. (2012)

<http://www.sharonburton.com/consumer-feelings-about-product-documentation-results-are-in/>

“It’s Worse than You Think: Poor Document Processes Lead to Significant Business Risk.” White paper from market research firm IDC, sponsored by Ricoh. Lots of graphs and statistics. Not specifically concerned with technical communication, but with “document-driven processes.” (June 2012)

<http://www.officia.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Poor-document-processes.pdf>

“It’s Not Your Product, Your Documentation Just Sucks.” Some tips on identifying a bad documentation site and getting it fixed. (2010)

<http://www.mindtouch.com/blog/2010/11/17/its-not-your-product-your-documentation-just-sucks/>

“The Cost of Bad Information.” A white paper from the Information Mapping company, with cost estimates of poorly organized documentation, and anecdotal evidence of improvements. (2012)

<http://www.informationmapping.com/en/resources-en/whitepapers/177-the-cost-of-bad-information>

“A Steep Price for Bad Documentation.” The story of the airline that went out of business because of missing technical documentation. (2006)

<http://intentionaldesign.ca/2006/09/24/a-steep-price-for-bad-documentation/>

“Watching Behavior before Writing the Rules.” *New York Times* story about testing the effectiveness of a dunning letter in order to reduce the number of people not paying tax. (July 2012)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/business/behavioral-science-can-help-guide-policy-economic-view.html?pagewanted=all>

Calculator for Support Savings. A spreadsheet designed by Jacquie Samuels, Technical Communication Consultant. Enter costs for your company—number of writers and tech support reps, salaries, cost of software, etc. Calculates the savings for good documentation. It’s brand new, and I haven’t used it. (October 2012)

<http://www.writingwise.biz/home/calculator>

Fighting Over Words. Case studies of civil cases on which a prominent forensic linguist consulted, including some about product documentation and warning labels and one about copyright violation. Shuy, Roger W. *Fighting Over Words: Language and Civil Law Cases*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.

Dynamics in Document Design. Research-based information about what makes effective documentation. Schriver, Karen A. *Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Text for Readers*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994.

