

Course: Corporate Communication and Public Relations

Lecture 3: Production of user manuals for trade-related items

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Objectives

By the end of this lesson, learners will be able to:

1. Define clearly a user manual.
2. Explain well the parts of user manual.
3. Illustrate adequately the types of user manual.
4. Explain effectively the importance of a user manual.

Definition

A user manual is an instructional book or booklet that is supplied with almost all technologically advanced consumer products such as vehicles, home appliances and computer tools.

It can also be defined a piece of paper that comes with anything you buy and usually ends up in the trash or in a bottom drawer.

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A user manual is a document intended to assist users in using a particular product, service or application.

It is usually written by a technician, product developer, or a company's customer service staff. They are also called “user guide.” Most user manuals contain both a written guide associated with images to be more comprehensive.

They help people to solve problems without having to seek outside help.

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The user manual covers detailed information around operations, standards & guidelines, troubleshooting guides, functionalities & more.

It's not necessarily meant to be read cover-to-cover, and should contain a table of contents and index to help customers find the section that's relevant to their issue.

It should contain a getting started guide at the beginning of the manual so customers can get up to speed quickly. It could be delivered as printed or online, or a mixture of both.

Importance of a user manual

Generally, a user manual serves as a document that informs customers how to use a given product/equipment.

- ✓ Step-by-step instructions,
- ✓ Best practices,
- ✓ Troubleshooting techniques.

Where to get a user manual

This technical communication document that gives assistance to users can:

- ✓ Come with the product
- ✓ Be purchased separately

Parts of a user manual

- a) Procedural steps
- b) Content clarity
- c) Glossary of terms
- d) Table of Contents
- e) Precautionary information

Key information on user manuals

User manual contains information needed to assist users in using a particular product, service or application.

It's usually written by a technician, product developer, or a company's customer service staff.

Organization of information on manuals

Information on user manual should be broken down into sequential steps that are presented in order as a numbered list. Instructions are provided one point per step to make it easy for users to follow easily.

Users are told what the completed task will look like before they move on to the next step.

Principles of good information presentation

In making good manuals, consider the following:

- Think and communicate visually: Humans remember images and words better than words alone.
- Be consistent: Keep a design and use a consistent style (fonts, colors).
- Focus: Keep your audience focused on most important instructions.
- Be in the shoes of the readers: Try to answer all necessary questions.
- Coherence: All steps in the user manual should have a coherence.

What are the different types of user manual?

User manuals can be created for many topics and purposes; thus they vary depending on their purposes. The following are of the types of manuals:

1. Instruction Manual
2. Training Manual
3. Service Manual
4. User Manual
5. Operation Manual
6. Organizational Policy Manual
7. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) Manual

Types of user manuals

There are a number of different types of user manuals that you should consider when embarking on your technical communication.

1. Instruction manual

An instruction manual contains basic instructions that tells users how best to use a product.

2. Training manual

A training manual is a set of instructions that tell users how to complete a job, process or task.

3. Service manual

A service manual is a set of instructions guiding users on how to keep a piece of machinery running at different points in its life.

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4. User manual

As mentioned before, user manuals are technical communication documents that assist users with the operation of a product.

5. Operation manual

An operation manual is the documentation of your company's information including roles, responsibilities and processes.

6. Organizational policy manual

An organizational policy manual documents the company's policies, procedures and best practices.

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7. Standard operating procedures(SOPs) manual

A standard operating procedure provides clear instructions telling members of an organization how to go about completing certain processes.

Whichever type of manual you are writing, there are some common themes that you can follow when writing your documentation.

What makes a good user manual?

1. Plain language

Don't use flowery prose when writing your user manual. Your writing should be clear, simple, and easy to understand, without requiring a dictionary to get through.

Use short sentences and words to make your text accessible. If you have to use a technical term, make sure you define it or link to a glossary.

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2. Visual

Without visuals, your user manual will end up being a long wall of text without anything to break it up or catch the attention of your users. In this way, a lot of user manuals can be, well, boring to read.

Make your documentation interactive by adding relevant images, diagrams and videos for your users to engage with. Make it clear which step of the instructions your visuals are referring to so users can make sense of them.

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3. Logical hierarchical structure

Your users need to be able to search through your user manual using a predefined sense of structure to guide them. Your contents should have a logical hierarchical structure that makes sense to users when they are looking for information.

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4. Searchable content

Ideally you need to make your content searchable for users by delivering it as an online knowledge base with a clear and prominent search bar. Your search bar should predict the terms that your users are typing in and search both the title and body content of your articles.

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5. Clear topics and relevant articles

You should organize your content into clear topics that make sense for the articles contained within them. You should not have too many topics for your documentation or that could be overwhelming for users, and at the same time don't have too many levels of subtopics or your documentation could be difficult to penetrate.

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6. Feedback and reviews

Actively seek feedback from your users on your user manual and take their suggested improvements into account. Find out whether your users are actually being successful with your manual and whether it is enabling them to solve their problems.

Creating the content

Prior to the development of a user manual, a writer should consider his/her audience to produce a relevant document. The focus has to be on the following features of the audience:

- ✓ Background (social, education, demographic)
- ✓ Skills level
 - Use appropriate vocabulary
 - Translate necessary terms
- ✓ Needs and use

The questions readers ask most often

- ✓ What will these instructions help me do?
- ✓ Is there anything special I need to know to be able to use these instructions effectively? (Introduction)
- ✓ If I am working with equipment. Where are the parts I need to use? (Description of the equipment)
- ✓ What materials, equipment, and tools do I need? (List of materials and equipment needed)
- ✓ Once I am ready to start, what exactly do I do? (directions)
- ✓ Something isn't working correctly. How do I fix it? (Troubleshooting)

Users read instructions in one of the three ways

- ✓ Some read instructions all the way through before beginning to follow any of the steps
- ✓ Others read and perform each step without looking ahead to the next
- ✓ Others begin a task without reading any instructions and turn to them only when difficulties arise.

Remember

- ✓ An incorrect audience analysis is the biggest reason why instructions and manuals fail.
- ✓ Language should always be clear, concise, and brief.
- ✓ Do not use long or complex sentences.

Writing instructions (intro)

- ✓ Have reader-centered title (what does the writer have to do?).
- ✓ Have a clearly stated purpose that includes reader benefits.
- ✓ List parts, materials and conditions.

User manual writing instructions

- Order/organize steps from the first step to the last one.
- Use present tense and imperative mode.
- Provide the right amount of info for each step.

Why does your business need user manuals?

- A user manual equips people to solve problems without having to seek outside help.
- In our instant gratification driven society, it is important to provide your patrons with the tools to quickly and efficiently get the benefit they want from your product or service, and a good user manual can accomplish just that!

Instructions

- ✓ Tell readers what to expect after following the instructions.
- ✓ Suggest other uses and options if appropriate.

Organizing and design of info

- ✓ Separate your instructions into logical pieces (chronological order).
- ✓ Use relevant instructions/graphics.
- ✓ Make sections of your instructions visually distinct.
- ✓ Separate and label info that is not directly part of your instructions.

Parts of a user manual

1. Procedural steps
2. Content clarity
3. Glossary of terms
4. Table of contents
5. Precautionary information

1. Procedural steps

- This is the main body of the user manual, and most likely involve a problem that can't easily be summarized or explained.
- Logical, numbered steps help the user solve a problem.
- To aid in clarity, illustrations or videos can help with component or experience visualization.

2. Content clarity

Whenever possible, avoid technical language that may isolate audience segments. Imagine you are writing for a junior high school student.

Tables and graphs can help show how sections of content relate, compliment and contrast.

3. Glossary of terms

Every industry has its own language and vocabulary, but some users may not be familiar with even the most commonly used terms.

A glossary of terms not only serves as a reference tool, but also gives each term a “home,” eliminating the need for the writer to repeatedly re-state and re-explain definitions.

4. Table of Contents

As a general rule, if a manual has more than twelve pages, a table of contents should be used. Entries are listed in order of presentation with accompanying page numbers.

5. Precautionary information

Warnings, notes of caution and danger notices aid user safety and help the manufacturer address liability concerns related to the product.

Use universal graphic symbols to represent each type of risk to the end user.

Purpose & Audience

Explain the purposes of the instructions unless it is obvious (i.e. the purpose of a coffee maker)

Examples:

- These instructions are for nurses who must inject dye into a vein through a balloon-tipped catheter
- This safe practices book is for employees who operate cranes and riggers

Tips for writing a user manual

- Provide step by step sequences in the correct
- Follow the timing and sequencing of the actual operations
- Provide visual stepping stones (e.g. step 1, step 2 etc.)
- Avoid lengthy paragraphs
- Use everyday words and terms (Avoid jargon)
- Explain what a function or feature is for as well as 'how to' instructions
- Check that the instructions match the actual product
- Explain symbols, icons and codes early
- Avoid creating dead-ends

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- Avoid patronizing the user
- Do not assume the user has prior experience or product knowledge
- Usability test the instructions alongside the product using naïve users
- Write the present tense and active voice
- Write the steps to task completion while doing the actual task on a real product.

Challenges

While user manuals are valuable resources for understanding and using products effectively, users often encounter various challenges when using them. Some common challenges include:

- ✓ **Complexity and Jargon:** User manuals can be filled with technical terminology and jargon that may be difficult for the average user to understand, especially if the product is complex. This can lead to confusion and frustration.
- ✓ **Lack of Clarity:** Some manuals may not provide clear and concise instructions, making it challenging for users to follow the steps accurately. Unclear diagrams, poorly written text, or missing information can all contribute to this problem.

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- ✓ **Length and Overwhelming Amount of Information:** User manuals for certain products, especially complex ones, can be lengthy and overwhelming. Users may find it daunting to sift through pages of information to find answers to their specific questions.
- ✓ **Poor Organization:** Poorly organized manuals can make it difficult for users to find the information they need quickly. If the manual lacks a table of contents, index, or logical structure, users may struggle to locate specific instructions.
- ✓ **Incomplete or Outdated Information:** User manuals may not always be up-to-date with the latest software updates or product revisions. Inaccurate or outdated information can lead to confusion and may not address current issues or features.

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- ✓ **Language and translation issues:** For products sold internationally, user manuals may be translated into multiple languages. Translation errors or language barriers can hinder understanding and lead to misinterpretations.
- ✓ **Lack of visual aids:** Visual aids like diagrams, illustrations, and screenshots are essential for understanding many products. If a manual lacks these elements or presents them poorly, it can be challenging to follow instructions.
- ✓ **User preferences:** Some individuals may prefer different learning styles, such as video tutorials or interactive guides, over traditional printed or digital manuals. User manuals may not cater to these preferences.

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- ✓ **Accessibility issues:** User manuals should be accessible to individuals with disabilities, but this is not always the case. Lack of accessibility features, such as proper text-to-speech compatibility, can be a significant challenge for some users.
- ✓ **User overreliance on manuals:** In some cases, users may become overly reliant on the user manual and not attempt to troubleshoot or explore the product independently. This can hinder their learning and problem-solving abilities.

To address these challenges, manufacturers and creators of user manuals should strive to make their documentation clear, concise, and user-friendly. They can also provide additional support channels, such as online FAQs, customer forums, or customer support hotlines, to help users when they encounter difficulties.

Equipment with no user manual

Encountering equipment without a user manual can be challenging, especially if the equipment is complex or requires specific instructions for safe and effective use. Here are some steps you can take if you find yourself in this situation:

Contact the Manufacturer or Supplier

Reach out to the manufacturer or supplier of the equipment. They may be able to provide you with a digital or physical copy of the user manual or direct you to online resources where you can find the information you need.

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Search Online

Many manufacturers provide user manuals and documentation on their websites. You can often find digital copies of user manuals by searching for the equipment's model number or name along with "user manual" in your preferred search engine.

Check Online Communities

Online forums, communities, and social media groups related to the type of equipment you have may have knowledgeable users who can share tips, instructions, or links to user manuals.

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Look for Similar Equipment

If you can't find a manual specifically for your equipment, look for manuals for similar or comparable equipment. While not ideal, these manuals can often provide some guidance on how to use your equipment.

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Experiment with Caution

If you have no other resources available and must use the equipment, proceed with caution. Make sure you understand the basics of its operation and any safety precautions. Try simple functions first and gradually explore more advanced features.

Consider Professional Assistance

Depending on the type of equipment, it may be wise to seek the help of a professional or technician who is experienced with similar equipment. They can provide guidance on proper usage and maintenance.

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Request a Replacement Manual

In some cases, you may be able to request a replacement user manual from the manufacturer or supplier. They might charge a fee for this service, but it can be worth it for complex equipment.

Explore Video Tutorials

Video-sharing platforms like YouTube often have video tutorials for a wide range of equipment. These tutorials can be helpful in visually demonstrating how to use the equipment

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Join User Groups

If the equipment is commonly used in a particular industry or community, consider joining relevant user groups or associations. Members of these groups may have access to resources or be willing to share their expertise.

Remember that safety is paramount when using equipment without a user manual. If you are unsure about any aspect of the equipment's operation or safety precautions, it's best to seek expert guidance or refrain from using it until you have access to proper instructions.

Remember

When writing a user manual make sure that you...

- ✓ Know your audience.
- ✓ Keep your instructions simple.
- ✓ Start with an introduction.
- ✓ Use a clear and effective visual hierarchy.
- ✓ Don't skip steps just because they seem obvious.
- ✓ Conclude with a summary or description.

References

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Thank you!