

How Clear Communications Contribute to the Bottom Line

Introduction

Upper Management traditionally regards a company's communications programs (technical documentation, procedures writing, training) as cost centers. As such, when times get rough, these programs are often the first to go on the block.

But is the “cost center only” an accurate perception?

Communications' Importance to Customers

It's happened to everyone. You see the latest electronic gizmo in a store. It's made by Acmechi, a respected name. You read the packaging and marketing claims. The salesperson gives you a demo. You're sold. You don't know how you ever got along without this wonderful new gadget!

Then you get it home and try to make it work. It's harder than you expected. So you get out the Instruction Manual and discover it was written by a non-native speaker who may have had some high school English. Now you're really frustrated, so you call the toll-free Tech Support number and spend 45 minutes on the phone. Finally, your new Acmechi product works — sort of.



You're not happy with the product or company and say to yourself, “I'll surely think twice before buying another Acmechi product!”

Because the Instruction Manual was so poorly designed for your use, you developed a mistrust for the whole company. This “halo effect” is common, and it can be easily avoided. Just think — if the manual had been clear and easy to use, you would be inclined to make your next purchase from the same company. But instead, to maybe save a few yen in the short run, Acmechi has jeopardized its future business with you.

Of course, the manual doesn't have to be written by a non-native speaker. Many people remember the famous scene from M*A*S*H* when our fearless heroes were reading from an Army manual to disarm an unexploded bomb. “Cut the white wire.” Snip. “But **first**, be sure to . . .” This example shows instructions that were written without considering the user's point of view. This type of error is rampant today in software application manuals, often written by programmers who seem to take the attitude, “Well, if they don't know what an IBCAK* error is, they shouldn't be using it anyway.” This attitude, of course, is insulting and condescending to the poor person who's just trying to put a graphic in his or her report. Which is to say, the person who buys the software and brings money to the company.

The same attitude is evident in manuals that are text dense — 20,000 words for every picture. In fact, as humans process information, words and graphics are two sides of the same coin. Psychological studies show repeatedly how information that is both read and seen in graphic form is understood better and remembered longer than information absorbed through reading words alone.

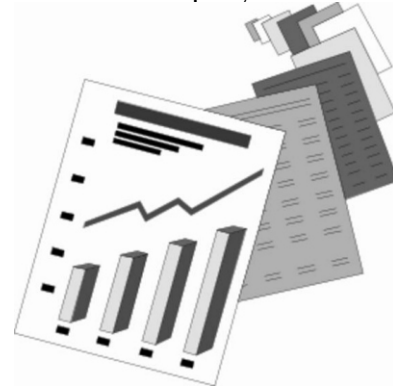
* IBCAK — Idiot Between Chair And Keyboard

All of these points go back to one fundamental goal: improved Customer Satisfaction/Service. And it is a truism that good Customer Service results in increased sales, i.e., service that goes straight to the bottom line. And, in many cases, the front line of good Customer Service is the User's Manual — the “Service Representative that stays with the product.”

The Importance of Clear Internal Communications

As important as it is to communicate clearly with Customers, internal communications also contribute to the bottom line in a number of ways.

Have you called your bank and gotten an answer to your question from a Customer Service representative? Then, an hour later, thought of something else and got a different representative, only to be told, “Oh, no, that's not the way to do it. What you need to do is . . . “? If all representatives have the same solutions (in paper or intranet form), Customers receive consistent answers, which improves their satisfaction with the company and makes them loyal buyers. But it also improves employee relations — employees are secure in the knowledge that they can do or say the right thing every time. This knowledge contributes to employee satisfaction, which leads to reduced turnover (see “First, Break All the Rules,” a Gallup study on employee satisfaction and its relation to increased revenues). Clear procedures create efficient operations.



Good documentation also helps ensure consistent quality, be it product or service. ISO and Sigma Six place high value on documentation. ISO even says, “If it isn't documented, it doesn't exist.” Written procedures lead to finding the best practices and issuing clear, easy-to-follow procedures so the same high-quality product and/or service is rendered every time. Everybody knows what to do and how to do it, leading to increased employee satisfaction as well as customer confidence.

Clear documentation contributes to the bottom line in other ways, too. The clearer the instructions, the fewer the calls to Customer Support and the less need for a big support staff. Clear instructions and disclaimers reduce legal liability. And good documentation and training materials help reduce training costs.

Conclusion

Clear, concise documentation for both customer and internal staff contributes to the bottom line. Confusing documentation costs companies millions, if not billions, of dollars each year. The cost of even one writer and one illustrator can save many times more — money that can flow to the bottom line. It's a pretty good Return On Investment.

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