

Tech Pubs Tips

Tips for Technical Publications

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ON TIME PROJECTS



As an old saying goes, "Time is Money." Therefore, it would also seem to be true that "Lost Time" is also "Lost Money."

When planning your projects ensure that you have considered all elements of risk that could cause the project to slip.

Unfortunately, one area that is usually overlooked in the initial planning is the project documentation. When establishing your project time lines DO NOT FORGET the time necessary to prepare documentation for both your project and the products or services being created, or managed, by this project. Failure to factor documentation development time could result in project delays.

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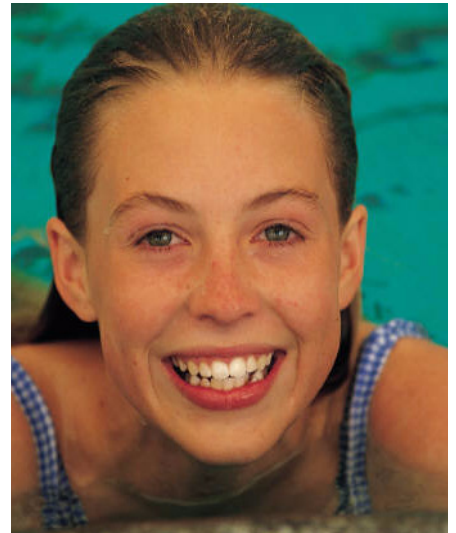
PROVIDE WELL TRAINED EMPLOYEES

Even if your company is not a certified ISO 9000 company, the need to ensure your employees are well-trained is vital. Your employees represent you, the company, to your customers. The products they build and the services they perform are all representative of the company. To ensure they represent you to the best of their ability, you should have:

- A formal training plan that describes the training to be provided to all new employees. Additionally, it should detail the training requirements for each job position, and how often refresher training must be conducted.
- A Customer Service Manual that details Customer Service Requirements, including any formal courses employees should complete, how you want your customers treated, and policy guidance on the correct methods of handling customer complaints.

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KEEP YOUR CUSTOMERS HAPPY



Your customers are your company's lifeblood. Without customers, you might as well shut your doors and go home. Obviously, keeping your customers happy and willing to continue to purchase your products and services is important. You also want them to continue to provide positive endorsements for your products and services.

Presuming that your products and services are "top of the line" and your customers will enjoy them, you also need to ensure they know how to use them. Don't scrimp on documentation. An "average" product that provides clear, easy to use documentation will typically provide a positive customer experience.

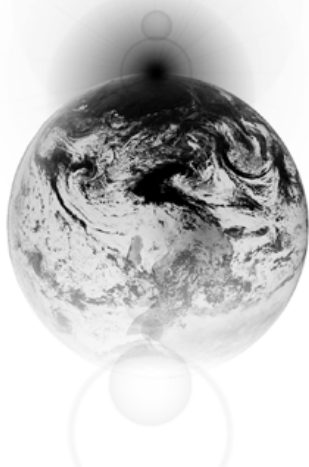
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IMPROVE YOUR CUSTOMER SERVICE AND YOUR PROFITS



If you would like to offer 24-hour Customer Service *without* maintaining a 24-hour Customer Service Department, invest in improvements to your company website that focus on providing your customers with the information they need to answer their questions and resolve their problems — without actually having to speak to someone in person.

Your website can also be used to drive additional sales. Unlike your Marketing Department, your website doesn't take evenings, weekends, and holidays off.



The World is your customer — are you ready?

Use your website as a comprehensive information delivery system. Give your customers Marketing Information, Customer Service Information, Warranty Information, and Troubleshooting Information.

Be sure to provide the ability for your customers to correspond with different departments so they can get answers to questions and troubleshoot problems.

Always make it as easy as possible for your website visitors to gather information about your products and services and even make online purchases. As the Internet continues to grow, more and more purchases are being made from company websites, such as yours.

Don't forget to create website tracking capabilities to learn where which sections of your website your customers are visiting and how long they are staying there. This valuable information will provide clues to not only the types of information your customers are interested in, but will also provide critical information on the strengths and weaknesses of your website design and content.

For example, if your customers visit your "Frequently Asked Questions" section but do not stay there very long, you need to answer the following questions:

- Did they leave quickly because the question they needed answered was easy to find and provided a clear, easy to understand answer to their question? or
- Did they leave quickly because this section is in need of major work and your customer couldn't quickly find the information they sought and they left in frustration?

In either event, you get the idea. There are powerful tools available to you mine and analyze your website statistics. If you don't understand this critical data, be sure to get some help from a website professional.

A final thought is that your website should not be considered as a tool to sell products or services just to customers that live far away. Your local customers have computer access also. Many of them may prefer to learn about you online instead of listening to one of your salesmen give them the "hard sell."

FEEL THE "NEED" FOR "SPEED"



If your business is poised for rapid "take-off," or has already started its ascent, you must be prepared to manage that growth without skipping any vital steps.

You cannot forget that when your products or services change, you must also make sure that you update the manuals and instructions that describe them. Just because you have improved your product doesn't mean that your customers know how to use this newer version. This is especially important if your improvements impact your user's experience — how the product works, how it looks, or how it "feels" to your customer. Many times this can be completed with a simple Addendum. However, other times you might need to create a whole new version release.

Don't forget your website when you are updating your product documentation. Out of date websites can make your customers question whether or not you have "forgotten anything else." They could even question the value you place on good customer service if you don't think enough of them to provide them current information everywhere.

ON TIME PROJECTS

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PROJECT DOCUMENTATION: This type of documentation typically includes written versions of the Project Plan and the Statement of Work. Also included are meeting notes, task lists, emails, and all project reports.

PRODUCT DOCUMENTATION: This type of documentation is required if the project involves the development of a product. Product documentation, whether for a software product, or a hardware product, typically includes product specifications, marketing literature, press releases, user guides, owner's manuals, assembly or installation instructions, website literature, help files, service manual/update (for hardware), customer service support documents (for software) and product announcements.

LOW PRIORITY: Unfortunately, many managers do not understand the true value of proper documentation. They often believe that "anyone" can write meaningful documentation, thus they often make this very important part of their project a low priority. They typically believe that doing the "paperwork" is reserved as part of the project's final clean-up, not something to be planned and worked on throughout the project.

Documentation that is not properly planned, designed, or thoroughly reviewed because it has been considered more of an "after-thought" to the project, rather than a vital component of the project can lead to problems for the company. Last-minute rushing of your documentation usually results in poorly written manuals and specifications that can have embarrassing gaps in the content.

Worse yet, the last-minute rush to review these poorly written documents during an emergency release cycle (after all, the printer can't wait, he has his work planned) can also leave the company at risk legally. When documents are pushed through the review process, they often do not get the thorough review they deserve. This can leave the company potentially liable for these possible omissions.



A well trained staff if vital to your success.

DO IT RIGHT: So, when planning your project, make sure that you identify each piece of documentation that will be required for the project. Share this information with your Project Team and assign documentation tasks to team members as appropriate to the subject matter and the documentation type.

Finally, make sure you use the services of a professional technical writer or editor to produce the final product before it is released.

With proper planning, your technical publications staff should be able to do this work and allow you to keep to your project time lines. If circumstances change and your time lines slide, then get some extra professional help to complete your documentation in a professional manner and within your mandated timelines. If needed, you can use professional staffing firms to provide temporary help, or you can simply hire a company, such as EFMPro, to be your "extra set of hands."

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

If English is a "second language" to your customers, you should consider having your documentation translated. This will make sure your customers understand how much you appreciate them and want them to enjoy your products and services.

PROVIDE WELL TRAINED EMPLOYEES

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- Service Repair procedures that are documented for easy reference and consistent, standardized repairs. You want to remove as many risk areas as possible by making sure your Service Technicians always perform the same job the same way. This can be a major factor in avoiding problems with your customers, or helping to resolve them if something does go wrong.

If you already have a formal training plan, check it to see if it is still current — based on your current product line and the current methods being used in your Service Repair or Customer Service Departments.

If you do not have a formal training plan, you owe it to your customers to create one. If you don't know how, or if you don't have the time, don't hesitate to get help from someone specializing in Curriculum development, such as EFMPro. Let our certified instructors help you plan or develop your training plans. Our instructors have developed and taught courses for the U.S. Air Force and even local ROP classes. They have also worked with Subject Matter Experts to develop Computer Based Training and the materials to help college professors to develop and teach their own classes.

REDUCE INVENTORY COSTS



If you are still printing a year's supply of your Owner's Manuals and other documentation with a "web-press" solution because you believe it to be cheaper, you should consider changing to a "Print-On-Demand" solution. This could prove to be a WIN-WIN situation for you.

A "Print-On-Demand" solution allows you to release updated documentation whenever your product or services change *without* having to destroy a large quantity of out-of-date documentation.

You can even implement "remote printing" technologies to print your documentation in remote locations, such as Europe or Asia, and save the costs of

storing and shipping it. Print-On-Demand technology is especially productive when used with remote printing technology.

You should also consider providing your documentation electronically via your website. In many instances your customers can simply download the document they want and print a copy on their home printer. That's one less document you have to pay to print, store, and ship.

KEEP YOUR CUSTOMERS HAPPY

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Today's customers are more informed and want to do their own research. Help them decide to purchase YOUR products and services by giving them what they want—information that tells them in "simple terms" why they will be happy with their decision to buy from you.

Consider providing warranty information on your website also. It can help your customers decide that they want your products because they know you will stand behind them.

Make sure that when things change, your Customer Service Reps and Service Technicians fully understand your new policies and procedures. **Give it to them in writing.**

A "happy customer" is an informed customer, who also receives service from employees that are well trained and have a clear understand of your policies and procedures.

IF YOU NEED HELP

If your company is moving too fast for your staff to keep up, or if you would like to implement any of the ideas presented here and don't have staff available, you can contact EFMPPro for assistance.

Our professional staff is here to assist you. We have over 25 years of experience in all phases of document management. Whether you are looking for help with print, electronic, online (web), or multimedia documentation we can help you.

If you need help or guidance for your Marketing Materials, Manufacturing Work Instructions, Training Curriculum, Website Design or Development, Service Manuals or Bulletins, Owner Manuals, Assembly or Installation Instructions, or Video Production for DVD or the web, we can help you.

We also work closely with translation companies to produce translated documentation in all major languages.

Call us — our Staff is waiting for you.



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