

## CASE STUDY

**Beware the User Agenda**

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Susan's continuing interest is in developing practical information models that deliver value to information users.

A Web site is launched, giving customers alternative access to a supplier's services. No more long waits in agency or phone queues. The supplier is confident. The match between user need (get service without waiting) and the business strategy seems perfect.

Months later, the business is heavily promoting the Web site in offline activities, including promotions every 30 seconds while customers wait for services on the phone. If you combine the implications of massive offline promotions and anecdotal evidence from colleagues and friends about site activity, there is little to encourage confidence that the Web-based business arm is meeting target performance levels.

Why? Why doesn't the match between a business strategy and a perceived user need enable the same predictable level of success on the Internet as it does in offline business? What is the wild card that exposes Web-based business to failure?

Compare in-store and online shopping. Figures vary about the exact percentage, but no one denies that the majority of online shoppers abandon their shopping cart before completing their purchase. In contrast, very few in-store transactions are abandoned at the last minute.

There is no need to explore the reasons for the difference in behavior of offline and online shoppers. Look rather at the *fact* of different behaviors. What has the Internet unleashed that is held in check when customers consider and execute purchases in-store?

Quite simply it's the user agenda: that determination to decide myself what is of value to me and to choose myself the way I want to access services—that realization that I have the power to reject your product and service right up to the last moment of commitment.

### CHALLENGING DEVELOPERS OF ONLINE DOCUMENTATION AND TRAINING

As technical communicators, we know the user agenda well, though many of us have struggled to ignore it.

In 1992, I tracked the gradual but total rejection of the proposal to use an online Help format to deliver an innovative software development methodology. Users were not prepared to read methodology-related content online.

Sometime in the mid-1990s, I listened to an engineer angrily complaining about a C++ multimedia self-study that wouldn't let him study just one knowledge area. The program "demanded" that he complete every part of the course. He just walked away.

In 1998, I watched colleague after colleague make a mindless, continue-button progression through online information about the new corporate performance evaluation program so that they could get to the point where they could do what they wanted to do: set up their individual performance objectives. The users found a

way to make nonsense of the designers' intent to force employees to review propaganda about the new program: they just paged past the content that did not interest them.

The user agenda lurks behind each anecdote. It is always an element of human experience, but its impact increases exponentially when users are by themselves in full control.

The same professionals who will sit through a classroom course and have their learning experience managed by a presenter will demand control in self-paced learning. Users will satisfy their agenda or, as did the software engineer in the mid-1990s, angrily turn off the program and walk away.

John Carroll's research in the late 1980s and early 1990s discovered the significance of

*"... the user agenda: that determination to decide myself what is of value to me and to choose myself the way I want to access services..."*

the user agenda for online performance support. Carroll's research explored how *users* want to learn and are *determined* to learn. "Jumping the gun can be seen as mere impulsiveness or disorganization, as an impatience for reading through manuals and plodding through exercises. And it surely is at least this. But if we pursue the underlying causes, jumping the gun can be seen as a desperate effort to inject meaning into a training experience."<sup>1</sup>

John Carroll's users were into "sense-making." When the organization of learning confronted user determination to make sense of what they were doing, sense-making triumphed.

### THE LURKING AGENDA

And how did technical communicators and training developers react to a user agenda movement like minimalism? Most found reasons to ignore its findings and implications despite the fact that leading communication and usability specialists praised the insights of Carroll's early research. Indeed, a very distinguished group of industry representatives contributed to the minimalist sequel, *Minimalism Beyond the Nurnberg Funnel*.<sup>2</sup> The group included two great friends of technical communication in Australia: John Brockmann and JoAnn Hackos.

At the Australasian Online Documentation conference in Sydney in 1999, Marsha Durham<sup>3</sup> was presenting guidelines for writing online when she commented lightly that users probably wouldn't read the online documentation anyway. Her aside dropped like a bombshell. The questions that followed focused entirely on how we, as writers, "get our users to read what we write."

Why were conference attendees so unexpectedly alarmed? From the initial Help implementations, technical communicators had witnessed user resistance to online information and user resentment that 'Help' promised much but gave little.

More important, were attendees asking the right question? Does the very question "how do we *get* our users to...?" reveal a mistaken belief in our "power"? What is our response to user behavior that declares implic-

itly "I won't try again if I don't get an answer the first time" or "Don't tell me what you want me to know, tell me what I want to know." What is our response to users and readers who know *their* power and demand value?

In his 1997 *keyword* article, Michael Olsson warned technical communicators about the limits of the writer's power. We may think that we have total control over the construction of the user's knowledge but "the author's *serious speech act* is only one factor in the reader's construction of knowledge. The readers' discursive environment will have a major (indeed a primary) impact on how they interpret the author's work."<sup>4</sup>

Has online information shifted the power balance? Not really. Users accessing online information and online products and services have simply shown that the illusion of author or supplier power can no longer be sustained.

### TO RETURN TO THE INTERNET

I would claim that we, as technical communicators, have reluctantly acknowledged the changed reader behavior that challenges our online documentation and training products, but at least we accept that user behavior did change when we started to deliver products online.

Somehow what we have learned has failed to impact the world of Internet solutions.

I recently listened to a marketing discussion that matched user need to the supplier's online business strategy. As marketing specialists, the participants knew how to do research to identify user need, and they knew how to guide clients to tune their business strategy to meet the needs identified. For the marketing specialists, a good match of need and strategy meant a good solution.

<sup>1</sup> J.M. Carroll, 1990. *The Nurnberg Funnel: Designing Minimalist Instruction for Practical Computer Skill*, p.76.

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Carroll, ed. 1998. *Minimalism beyond the Nurnberg Funnel*. Cambridge: MA: MIT Press.

<sup>3</sup> Marsha Durham. 1999. Writing Techniques for Paper and Online, Australasian Online Documentation Conference, March 22-23, Sydney, Australia.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Olsson. 1997. Foucault: Approaches to Understanding the Text in Context. *keyword*. 7 (3).


Right? Wrong! User need is not enough. The Internet wild card is the user agenda. “What’s in it for me?” “How accessible is this product or service?” “Why is it better than my offline options?” “I don’t *have* to make *your* Web site viable.”

The mathematics seem so simple. Explore the user agenda, build real user value into your online offering, and you succeed. Assume that customers will automatically line up for your services, and you fail.

An online equivalent to an offline product or service is not enough. Equivalence is the minimum requirement and will never be a driver if the offline offering is satisfactory and

comfortable. What successful Internet sites prove is that businesses need to define differentiating attributes for online products and services, not just see the Internet as an “alternative” business channel.

Like the developers of the corporate performance evaluation training, we technical communicators closed our eyes and attempted to ignore the user agenda as we pressed ahead with our online deliverables. Our awakening has been awkward and uncomfortable... and is unfinished.

But... how long will it be before the dot.com world recognizes the lurking user agenda? 

## A R T I C L E R E P R I N T

# Let’s Stop Writing Documentation and Start Working for the Users



*JoAnn Hackos, Center Director*

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Nearly 20 years ago, the profession of technical communication began to focus on developing task-oriented documentation. Although task-oriented documentation has always been produced, particularly for consumer products, it was not the standard in the computer industry. More often, people writing about computer systems focused on the system rather than on the tasks people needed to perform. Systems-oriented documentation was the norm.

Systems-oriented documentation, originally written by the systems developers themselves, explained how the system was designed to operate. It began as information to be passed on to maintenance programmers who were responsible for making changes in the original program. It ensured that the original system design would be clearly understood by other technical experts. It even provided a means for the original programmers to remain familiar with the details of their own work.

Systems documentation of this sort serves an important role in computer product development. It is a necessary component of the development process. In fact, when most users were computer professionals, ensuring that

mainframe programs were up and running, it was even appropriate for their use. Unfortunately, computer companies decided that this information was also sufficient for end users of their software. They often simply attached a new cover and shipped it off to unsuspecting computer novices. The novices, of course, were completely lost and quickly learned to rely on others in the workplace for information about what to do to use the software.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as the number of end users of software began to increase through the introduction of terminals and standalone special-purpose machines, computer software companies hired technical writers, and we began to invent a new field of writing for the computer industry and for the new and growing number of end users. Most of the initial user documents were modeled on the systems documentation produced during the software development life cycle. I remember many early projects in which we wrote documentation by directly reading the Cobol code to discover and communicate the details of data entry and reporting. Everyone agreed that this was what end users needed.