

When Customers Call Instead of Reading the Documentation

By Tanja Rosteck

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Tanja Rosteck
tanja@words4nerds.com

Words4Nerds <http://www.words4nerds.com>

Turning the Page: When Customers Call Instead of Reading the Documentation

Chances are good your support staff have dealt with this situation at least once:

A customer calls and says, "I don't have time to read the manual. Can you just walk me quickly through the product installation?" The technician taking the call becomes stressed out, and the customer ends up unhappy anyway because the installation took twice as long as normal.

As support professionals, we know the best service experience we can give is to empower and educate customers so they don't need to call us. However, if you routinely experience the above call situation, your documentation may not be doing its job. Read on to learn how to improve and market your documentation effectively, as well as deal with "reluctant" customers without sacrificing good customer service. And if you don't currently provide documentation to customers, better late than never - get started now!

I already have a product manual, but customers aren't reading it.

When customers say they don't have time to read the manual, you know that's probably not true. They certainly have enough time to call your helpdesk and perhaps wait on hold for a technician! It's easy to grumble about this situation, but you should acknowledge that customers are giving you valuable insight into the effectiveness of your self-help offerings.

Chances are one (or more) of the following reasons account for why your customers aren't reading the manual:

- * Accessibility (Your customers might not even know about the manual or where to find it.)
- * Presentation (The document layout is uninspiring, or doesn't effectively use visual "attention-grabbers" to draw the reader towards important information.)
- * Usability (Procedures are not presented in an easy-to-follow manner, or the manual is written in very technical language the customer may not understand.)

The best people to talk to in this situation are your customers. The next time a caller doesn't want to read your product manual, ask why. Is there a problem with accessing the file? Is the installation procedure too confusing? Perhaps the instructions aren't clear or a step is missing in the procedure. Always take the time to record customers' feedback on your documentation. Within a short time, the top issues that need to be addressed will become very clear.

Make a firm commitment to resolve these issues. Enlisting the help of a professional technical writer or "information designer" is recommended. An experienced technical writer will take the time to understand the goals of your documentation and how your average customer uses it, and will improve it accordingly. It may be a question of simply updating the page layout or turning a long procedure into a checklist, or it might even need a major style and language edit.

I don't think my customers even know we have a product manual.

If they don't know it exists, they can't use it - so tell them, at every opportunity.

- * Place a prominent announcement about the manual on the main page of your company's website, as well as on the product support site.

- * If you just published a re-worked or new manual, send a copy to all your existing customers, or at least send them a notification e-mail with clear download instructions.

- * Ensure your staff mentions the manual during every customer contact, if and when appropriate.

- * Place a prominent notice in your newsletter, e-zine, faxed update reports, surveys, or any other regular communications you send to you customers.

Believe it or not, most customers want to help themselves rather than call you just to install the product or ask a question about minimum system requirements. Once you market your manuals effectively, you should find these kinds of calls decreasing dramatically in number.

I've already followed all these steps, but customers are still calling for things that are in the manual. What should I do now?

Don't immediately assume the customer is just being lazy about reading the documentation - they may have slipped through the contact list for your e-mail notice, or perhaps the technician forgot to mention the manual during the previous call. Tackle this situation head-on:

- * Immediately refer the caller to the appropriate page in the manual, followed by "Is there something in this procedure I can clarify for you, Ms. Smith?" or another standard script.

Good customer service means always offering alternatives rather than a flat-out "No". Even if your documentation was developed with your customers' needs in mind and you've been marketing it every chance you get, you may still get some callers who are completely resistant to self-help. Every company has a few customers who would rather deal with a human than a PDF file or help screen - and that's okay.

- * Charge a set fee for all installation calls. (When determining the price, set it high enough to be a deterrent for most customers, but low enough to not be totally outrageous.)

Charging a fee for installations can bring needed revenue into your support center. And all installation walk-thoughts can be assigned to a junior technician, which helps with training and also leaves your senior staff free to work on more challenging problems.

Whatever methods you use to market your documentation and promote its use to callers, the keys are to be consistent and upfront. Take the time to ensure your front-line staff are fully prepared and have scripts to follow if necessary. And if you decide to charge for installation walk-throughs, ensure your customers are informed of the policy change, cost, and payment procedure before implementation - not after.

Remember, your customers are your most valuable source of information about whether your manual is doing its job. By letting them take part in the improvement process, you're making your own job easier and showing your customers that you care what they think. Of course, never forget your customer service basics - follow up and thank them for their comments, every time.

With these key points in mind, before long you'll find that routine, repetitive calls have become a thing of the past.

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