

An Unattractive Truth (Tech Writer's Lament)

Some truths take a while to sink in. After working as a technical writer at five brand-name companies, in three major fields, I have only recently realized: no-one's reading my stuff.

For years, I've devoted my energies to generating accurate and relevant content with controlled vocabulary, neatly-organized headings, and user-friendly layout. I've proudly published my word-smithed masterpieces, confident that each will be embraced as crucial and timely by its audience.

And yet, I periodically receive questions, the answers to which reside within my published works - "How do we build a JumpStart server?" "Where are those files supposed to be stored?" My answers consistently amount to "please see *Section X on Page Y of Document Z.*"

Feedback from readers is rare. Each of my documents has a handy hyperlink below the title, which launches a pre-addressed email message. To submit comments, all a reader has to do is type his or her thoughts, then click "Send." Sadly, I have received less than a handful of such emails since introducing this hyperlink over four years ago.

Even my internal clients – those who request the creation of documents – seem unaware of the scope of available information. Periodically, I receive requests to write and publish documents that already exist!

Thus, the truth has surfaced: only a small percentage of my audience are actually reading my documents. There is no line of fans eagerly waiting for my next UNIX procedure or business policy.

This truth is unattractive because the most accurate, well-organized, consistently-worded document in the world is useless if no one reads and applies its content. In all these years of writing, have I essentially been doing... nothing??

So it's time to set aside my tech writer hat and investigate. I suspect the tendency to avoid documentation is human nature. After all, don't people commonly talk about buying the latest gadget and tossing the manual in favor of hands-on experimentation? (Of course, this habit may have developed due to a trend of poor-quality documentation – a topic for another time, perhaps.)

However, based on informal research, I believe a major reason for my poor ratings is people's inability to find a particular piece of information when they need it. As JoAnn Hackos notes, "...content doesn't become... knowledge unless someone knows it's there..." (7)¹. Nowadays, even finding a starting point is complicated – should users search in email, their local computer, the team file-share, the doc management system, intranet website number one, intranet website number two, the World Wide Web... ?

If I can figure out how my audience looks for information, and precisely what they need, and then use content management tools to present just the right info at just the right time, perhaps my efforts at technical communication will be more successful.

For help with this new perspective, I turn to Drexel University's MS-LIS program. In this program, I hope to build on the knowledge management basics acquired from my tech writing experience. Once I improve my grasp of information science principles, I may be able to deliver content to my audience more effectively.

And then, maybe, people will read my stuff!

¹ JoAnn T. Hackos. Content Management for Dynamic Web Delivery. New York: Wiley, 2002.