

Helping organisations grow

Rachel Potts and Roger Hart explore three ways Technical Communication helps organisations achieve their aspirations for growth.



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Discussions of the value of Technical Communication often focus on the ways it can save money for organisations. It's true that Technical Communication can reduce costs: good product training and help materials reduce the need for the user to contact the support desk; well-written manuals protect the business from litigation; Technical Communicators are even seen sometimes as a cheaper alternative to having expensive technical specialists write content.

However, these aren't always very persuasive arguments for investing in good quality Technical Communication – not least because organisations often find it difficult to make spending decisions that relate to long-term cost reductions. What's more, having cost-reduction as your *raison d'être* really doesn't make for a great working environment: if your job is about saving money, there's always going to be pressure on you to do it faster and more cheaply – otherwise you're not saving the organisation as much money as you could be. Not very motivating, is it?

In this article, we'll explore some more positive ways of thinking about Technical Communication by suggesting three areas where making use of professional Technical Communication directly contributes to an organisation's ability to grow.

1. Good product information is essential for marketing and selling products

Historically, information such as found on help sites, in manuals and through support knowledge bases has been viewed as only relevant after purchase – and therefore as irrelevant to the way companies market and sell their product. But in recent years this view has had to shift in response to changes in the way people buy.

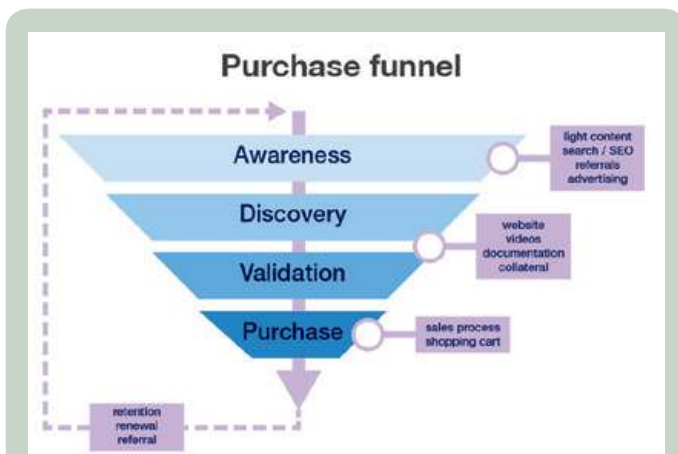


Figure 1. The purchase funnel: a well-used model of how people make purchasing decisions

*"All content is marketing"*¹

Modern marketing has changed with customer behaviour. Buyers are more informed, and view brands through every interaction they have; not just through traditional marketing such as adverts.

Availability online means the content produced by Technical Communicators is now used before purchase. It often turns up in search – becoming de-facto marketing – and is sometimes more effective than advertising at making customers aware a product exists.

This doesn't mean help topics should be written in 'marketing-speak'. It means the effort Technical Communicators put into making content accurate, clear and well-presented has value in persuading customers that this product is worth spending money on.

Attracting customers through content marketing

*"Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience ... Basically, content marketing is the art of communicating with your customers and prospects without selling... Instead of pitching your products or services, you are delivering information that makes your buyer more intelligent."*²

Content marketing recognises that customers – and potential customers – engage with genuinely useful information. Some organisations address this need for content by writing new technical papers or creating new product videos for their marketing campaigns. More savvy businesses make use of high-quality, informative content that already exists within the business – Technical Communication content – by linking to it in their email marketing or social media campaigns.

For example, TechSmith make use of a range of instructional content in their communications and social media channels as part of their content marketing for their range of software products. They've found that instructional videos are particularly popular in their 'marketing' newsletters, as well as on YouTube. Their research suggests that the reason people like this type of content when they're considering buying a product is because it shows them what's available in traditional marketing materials such as screenshot galleries and feature descriptions.

Purchasing decisions

Later in the purchase process, the customer needs to understand the detail of what a product does, and assess whether it is really suitable for their needs. The materials that Technical Communication teams normally produce – help, datasheets, knowledge base articles, how-to videos – meet this need. One company that 3di worked with recently saw customers referring to the whole range of 'support' content during the decision-making stage, not just the lighter-weight or more user-friendly content.

This is corroborated by industry data. For example, one piece of research found that in the Business-to-Business purchase process, 31% of respondents found “detailed technology guides / implementation scenarios” the most useful type of content available when identifying and evaluating.³

Google has done research on this from a consumer perspective, and saw the same pattern of usage of a wide range of materials in purchasing decisions. Their 2011 research found that “consumers consulted an average of 10.4 new media or traditional sources before purchasing, 2x the sources consulted just the year before”. This ranged from 5.8 sources for choosing a restaurant to 18.2 sources for choosing a car; choosing ‘tech’ saw an average of 14.8 sources used in the purchase process.⁴

2. Clear, easy to find information is at the heart of customer experience

“Customer experience (CX) is the sum of all experiences a customer has with a supplier of goods and/or services, over the duration of their relationship with that supplier.”⁵

Customer experience is big news in organisational management circles, and with the prevalence of good examples from Apple, Amazon and so on, customers’ expectations are increasingly high. Quality experiences are essential to attracting potential customers (for example, through reviews), making the sale (positive experiences create trust and confidence), and retaining customers.

In 2013, even Ryanair had to admit that customer experience affects revenues. Improvements here were key to turning the business around:

“[In 2014], exactly a year after the profit warning of 2013, Ryanair announced that for the half year to the end of September, traffic grew four per cent to 51.3 million customers, profits were up 32 per cent to €795m, and total revenues increased nine per cent to €3.54bn.

Jacobs [Ryanair’s Chief Marketing Officer] attributes the turnaround directly to the “improved customer experience”⁶

Technical Communication is at the heart of customer experience because it’s one of the very concrete ways in which a customer interacts with an organisation or product – by reading the manual, following a tutorial or referring to the help when they’re getting to know the product. So when an organisation decides it’s time to sort out its customer experience, Technical Communicators should be part of the transformation.

The value of customer experience doesn’t just apply to consumer products. Plenty of research suggests that business-to-business products and services also benefit from improved customer experience.

Customers demand effective self-service

“67% of consumers use web self-service knowledge to find answers to their questions.”⁷

Self-service is often one of the first aspects of customer experience that organisations set out to transform. In part, this focus is seen as a cost-saving activity (reducing customer service costs), but there’s a revenue-generating side to self-service too. Customers expect good online information as part of a quality product or service. To enjoy interacting with a company, customers need access to information that is organised in a way that makes it easy to find and presented in

a way that makes it easy to use, particularly when there are high volumes of content. And of course, this is exactly what good Technical Communication achieves.

Self-service isn’t just about answering questions about how to set up or use a product. For positive customer experiences information such as how to return an unwanted item or query your bill is also important and need to be just as easy to find, and be clear and accurate.

Technical communication habits are the essential basis of positive customer experiences

“Technical communication is at the heart of customer experience because it’s one of the very concrete ways in which a customer interacts with an organisation or product.”

Technical communicators are already used to thinking about factors that contribute to customer experience, in a way that other specialists around the business are not – so there’s also a more general opportunity here for organisations to make use of their skills. For example, for customers to trust a business they need to see consistent information that is accurate and up to date, and content needs to be well-written and free from typos.

Technical communication involves a unique combination of skills: proactively anticipating customers’ questions and potential challenges, communicating clearly, and managing content. For businesses to achieve excellence in customer experience, these skills need to be applied across all content.

3. Product information, best practices and operating procedures enable employees to do their jobs more successfully

“31% of [purchasers] found “detailed technology guides / implementation scenarios” the most useful type of content.”

People who know stuff can get stuff done, and people who can get stuff done are more motivated and happier. All of which is good for business. What’s more, employee engagement is a significant factor in customer experience.⁸

At 3di, Rachel often works with companies that have grown rapidly from just a few people – who can rely on having a chat when they need information – to a team of 50-100. When the company is small, no-one needs to write anything down, but when the company grows, new employees have poor access to information such as how a product works or why it’s set up in a particular way for a customer.

Worse, there are misunderstandings about the basic features – what a product actually is or does. This is why a first recommendation is often to create a high-level, agreed product description.⁹

Even in more mature organisations, there are areas where velocity and quality are affected by gaps in knowledge.

Tracking down the basic information needed to do a job is painful, and people work around it by avoiding tasks, making guesses, or configuring scenarios to test their understanding of how the product works.

Across the business, good information is essential for getting things done... and while getting things done efficiently does reduce costs, there are also much more positive benefits to be had: product delivery, customer experience, employee engagement, and revenue generation – all of which enable the business to grow.

More effective sales teams, increased sales

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Customers are happier when the product features the salesperson sells them turn out to be the same as the features that actually exist within the product they buy. Good internal product information is more likely to enable this.

What's more, when a salesperson is able to answer a potential customer's queries about a product quickly, there's less time for the customer to get distracted by competitor products – so more likelihood of a sale.

Smoother deployments, faster revenue collection

Access to a collection of best-practice information enables teams to set up the product reliably. Unsuccessful deployment leads to unhappy customers who are less likely to renew licences or purchase additional modules.


What's more, access to product information means fewer delays while teams track down details of obscure configuration options or find out whether the feature their customer is waiting for is enabled in the latest release.

Crucially, deployment is often a significant invoicing point for software products, so good product information helps companies collect revenues more quickly.

Reduced training, more expert capacity

One company that 3di works with has a franchise retail operation which traditionally takes five days of on-site training on business procedures to set up. With procedures captured more clearly in online training materials, the trainer now expects to only need to be on-site for one day - freeing up this expert to get more franchises opened, faster, which in turn will generate revenue faster for the company.

Conclusion

Technical communication isn't just a cost centre: it's also an essential factor for organisational growth. Focusing on these more positive aspects of value leads to much more interesting conversations about investment in technical communication. 

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