How to Write User Manuals, User Guides, Installation Guides, Online Helps, Instructional Manuals and Reports for Increasing Profitability of Enterprises

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Abstract – This paper describes the steps for making user manuals, user guides, installation guides, online helps, instructional manuals and reports for business enterprises. Companies invest so much in their products, but when they sell their products to a customer, who is unaware of how to use them, has only a booklet available with him/her. If the language written in that booklet is more of technical nature and not understandable to the user, then that adversely affects the business of the enterprise. On the other hand, if the language written in the user guide, user manual or installation guide is simple and easy to understand then customer would be happy, and in turn the enterprise. This communication reports how to prepare effective and simple user guides, user manuals or installation guides for laymen customers.

Keywords – User Manuals; User Guides; Installation Guides; Instructional Manuals; Online Helps; Reports; Technical Writer; Content Writer; Profit; Enterprises.

1. Introduction

When a customer purchases a new product or a service, he is unaware about how to use that product or a service. The only support the user gets is in the form of a user manual or an installation guide. Mostly users are not expert, but laymen. Therefore, it is very important to prepare the user guides from the layman's perspective. It is author's experience that the online help provided by many software companies for their servers are full of grammatical mistakes, missing table and figure numbers, with no clarity in the text. The main reason for this seems to be that these user manuals and guides are prepared by such technical people working in the organizations, who don't have sufficient exposure to writing/editing. This results in unsatisfactory feedback from the customers, putting the enterprises in awkward situation. This is common problem, which most enterprises face. In order to overcome such shortcomings, enterprises need to hire good professional writers, who have proven publication experience of writing book chapters, research papers, blogs, and instructional manuals, with the leading academic publishers. Writing is a very specialized and creative job. "*Reading is Habit, Writing an Expression - Sumit Goyal*". Therefore, for making good manuals and guides, enterprises need specialized experts.

In the business world, phrases such as '*Consumer is the King*', '*Customer is always Right*' are frequently used, suggesting that consumer is the most important entity for any business or enterprise to flourish. If costumer is happy, so will be the enterprise.

2. Thumb rules

Following two thumb rules should be strictly followed while making user manuals, user guides, installation guides and instructional manuals:

1. *Sentences should be short and without grammatical mistakes*
2. *Language should be easily understandable*

3. Steps for making user manuals, user guides, installation guides and instructional manuals

A professional technical writer must perform the following 11 rounds of writing and editing, before submitting the document for final publication:

1) Content Writing (Understanding user's requirement, Researching, etc.)

A good professional technical writer should first talk to the technical people of the organization and get as much information as possible about the user's requirements, and needs of the enterprise. After getting relevant information, researching is the next step, which should be followed rigorously for getting an idea from

the available published literature. After getting basic idea about the topic, the next and most important step is the creativity of the writer. Following two points should be kept in mind while preparing user manuals and installation guides:

    a)   ***Easy to read***
    b)   ***Easy to understand***

Technical writer should assume that customer is a layman, who does not have much knowledge about the product and the service. Therefore, it is the duty of technical writer to make small and easy sentences using simple English words so that the user can understand the content easily.

2) Copyediting

After preparing the user manual and installation guide, the next duty of the technical writer is to send the material for copyediting to the technical and senior people of the team, who are subject matter experts (SMEs) for modifying, including or deleting some of the matter, if necessary.

3) Making Abbreviations\ Acronyms

After getting green signal from the technical people of the team, the next duty of the proficient writer is to make a table of Abbreviations\ Acronyms, where expanded form of abbreviations of the technical terms is defined. Further, while preparing user guides and manuals for laymen, writers must use expanded form of abbreviations rather than using acronyms table at the top. Acronyms/ Abbreviations tables are prepared for technical people, who have good idea about the subject, if they need to see one or two acronyms, they can go to the nomenclature, but layman can't go every time to first page to see the meaning of technical term. Therefore, it is suggested that full form of abbreviations should be written in the user guides and manuals.

4) Checking for Structured English, Syntax and Grammar

Then comes the next step, where a technical writer must check the document for Structured English. However, not every technical writer is aware of what Structured English means! Structured English is the use of English language with the syntax of structured programming, *e.g.* IF, THEN, ELSE, DO, WHILE, *etc.* Writers coming from the research background with significant number of publications to their credit have in-depth knowledge about these specialized terms. The next step is to check grammar as it is the most important part of any document; it should be correct and accurate. Next step is to check the syntax of the text.

5) Checking Table Nos., Figure Nos.

This is a very important step as large number of mistakes found in documents relates to either completely missing of Figure and Table Nos. or not cited properly in the user manual and installation guides. This happens so because many of the technical writers themselves are not conversant with how to appropriately cite the Figure and Table Nos. in the document. Technical writers should always mention the table and figure numbers, before each of these appear in the text. For writing Figure and Table Nos., similar pattern should be followed throughout the document (Fig., Figure, *etc*).

6) Checking Font Headings and Sub-Headings

In the sixth step, a writer is supposed to check the font headings and sub-headings properly, and should be vigilant that there shouldn't be any mismatch of fonts in the document.

7) Formatting (font styles, bold, italics, etc.)

Technical writer must check the document for accuracy in formatting, *viz.,* font styles, bold, italics, *etc*.

8) References Styles

This is where enterprises would need a specialized writer from the research background or an author who has published research papers or written book chapters, as every technical writer is not aware how to write and cite references in a document. American Psychological Association (APA), Chicago and Modern Language Association (MLA) are the popular styles used for writing references.

9) Making Index, Hyperlinks

If the document is an online help user guide, then the technical writer should create Hyperlinks. Next very important and time taking step is making the Index of document. Writer must first take the printout of the index made by him. Then, he should compare each page with the matter prepared using computer with the printout and mark corrections, if any.

10) Proofreading\Galley Proof

Proofreading means reading of a galley proof to detect and correct production/printing errors in the text of document. After reading the galley proof of the document carefully and finalizing it, technical writer should send it for finalization to the technical team members and senior people of the organization.

11) Final Submission of Document for Publication

After getting green signal from the technical team and seniors of the organization, the technical writer should again perform proofreading and correct any errors, if any. After getting self satisfied, technical writer should submit the document to the publication team.

4. Perspective

On following the above steps, more than 99% accuracy is achieved in the document. However, often it

is seen that most professional writers are unaware of these steps, as they don't come from the R&D background. For obtaining best results, enterprises should hire writers from the research background with excellent publication record. A good professional writer must write all these steps on a sheet of A4 size paper, and use a highlighter and different colours of pens to mark what has to be done. Writing a manual or a user guide is very similar to writing a book chapter, research paper or a review paper. It involves at least eleven rounds of writing, reviewing and editing. Therefore, it is suggested that enterprises should hire writers who have extensive experience of writing research papers, review papers and book chapters. Technical professionals working at an enterprise should assist technical writer about the needs and requirements, which they want in the user guides and manuals. Companies invest heavily on everything from software to employees, but when it comes to report writing, which is the most effective tool of marketing, they feel handicapped for the want of qualified and well experienced technical writers. If the submitted reports are inaccurate having errors in indexing, grammar, formatting, syntax, and referential errors, then that does not present good picture of the enterprise to their clients.

It adversely affects the business of the enterprise, as no client would want an inaccurate and complex report. Thus, the profits of the enterprises may not be commensurate with the heavy investments made by them. Therefore, for flourishing the business and increasing the profits, enterprises should hire technical writers having excellent publication record of writing research papers and book chapters.

Author's Biography

Sumit Goyal received his Bachelor and Master's degree from the central university of Government of India. He has published many research papers in international journals throughout the world, which have been citied more than 465 times. Besides that, he has also written book chapters, instructional manuals, review articles, technical papers and brought out special issues of international journals, as Guest Editor. He is holding positions in the editorial board of 32 world renowned international journals. His interests include Professional Writing, Editing, Artificial Intelligence and Social Media.