# EXPERT ◆ SUPPORT

# Documentation as a Competitive Advantage

## For Computer Hardware Products

*Douglas C. Shaker*

You're working on the release of your new software, hardware, widget, or other technical masterpiece, and realize that you need to include documentation in the package to get your customers started using your product. The question is, what role do you want the docs to play?

Many product managers seem to feel that documentation is just something you have to have because those pesky customers keep asking for it. If that's the way you feel, you can simply provide basic installation instructions and some sort of cleaned up FAQ. It'll be cheap and easy, but the cost shows up in other areas, like a lengthened sales cycle, the prospects that you never close, and the hundreds and thousands of support calls someone—you? the engineers? your large and efficient support center?—has to respond to. With minimal docs, you're essentially substituting the labor of your sales, marketing, engineering, and support staff, for pieces of paper. It's tough to make money that way.

On the other hand, you can decide to make your documentation a competitive advantage. Good documentation is a tool, a tool to accomplish a specific job. Good installation documents, for example, are tools to help the customer install the software quickly, easily, and successfully. If you make your install documents the best in your market, your are giving customers the right tools to help them prepare the site, install the hardware, and be ready to start using the product. If your owner's manuals and user guides are a competitive advantage, they ensure that your customers get the most value from the products as rapidly as possible. Your documents include clear photos and diagrams, and tables that are easy to read and complete. Your customers can easily find application notes and readme files, and indexes, cross-references, and links help them navigate the documents and locate the information they need.

With competitive documentation, sales and support costs shrink. The demo install doesn't require a sales engineer. Sales are easier because the documents tell customers what the software can do and how to use it. Support costs shrink because customers can find their own answers in the documentation. Customers are more likely to be successful because they find the answers quickly, not after a few hours on the phone. The message is, buy and use our product and you will be successful in your job and your tasks. It's a good message to send.

Think about it. A customer can choose between two products. One has a great set of documentation that's comprehensive and easy to use. The other has an install guide and a glorified FAQ. Which is your product? Which will the customer buy and use? Which creates the best impression of your company? Which gives you the higher profit margin?

Douglas C. Shaker is Expert Support's Vice President.

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