

# Documentation as a Competitive Advantage

## For Software 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 some documentation in the package to get your customers started using your product. The question is, what role do you want your documentation to play?

Many product managers seem to feel that documentation is just something you must 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 software 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. Reference manuals are tools to give information on some encyclopedic cut at the software, usually the API. If you put in the time, your reference manuals are the most complete and easy to access in the market.



They have indexes and hyperlinks to make it as easy as possible for the user to find things. And your Getting Started manual actually gets the customer started using the software and resolving their problem. By committing to make your documents a competitive advantage, you're saying that you want to provide your customers with the best and most comprehensive information you can.

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?

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

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