

what is being done well: “maintain the high quality of *A to Z*,” “the newsletter and listserv are great,” “continue the great work on the newsletter,” “the evaluation checklist is very good,” and “I’m glad to hear about the indexing style guide!” It’s great to get that kind of feedback.

The STC website summarizes the conference by saying, “the conference evaluations indicate that the majority of attendees found this year’s conference to be a better experience than others they attended, and 27 percent of respondents rated it as ‘outstanding.’ Attendees look forward to an even more successful conference next year.”

We’re also looking forward to an even more successful conference for the Indexing SIG next year. We’re already planning sessions on indexing based on the feedback that we’ve received from you, the SIG members. We really do appreciate your feedback; we hope to have more great sessions on indexing at next year’s conference in Chicago. See you then!

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## The Value of Indexes

by Bob Richardson

Recently, a colleague of mine was asked to make a presentation to her management on how indexes can improve customer satisfaction and save the company money. She asked if I knew of any studies, or had any statistical information, that could support her intuitive, but unsupported, conviction that the investment of time and money to create good indexes for their technical documentation is justifiable.

I did not have a statistical contribution to make, but the following thoughts occurred to me some years ago and were discussed with indexers and corporate representatives at the ASI conference in San Diego.

I believe that a user manual is, in a very real sense, a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week unpaid company representative, usually located no more than a few feet from the customer’s computer or workplace. Whether paper copy, online help, or CD-ROM makes no difference. I can think of no other equivalently cost-effective opportunity to ensure your company’s positive, interactive presence on a permanent 24/7

basis in thousands of customers’ homes and workplaces. Every time the user refers to the manual this is a very real, active exchange between the customer and the company. This company-customer interaction occurs again and again, and at no further dollar cost to the company.

The significance really goes much farther than merely saving a call to tech support. It has to do with the buyer’s perception of the issuing company as either helpful and sensitive in times of need, or remote, unsympathetic and indifferent. I say “in times of need” because most users do not read instruction manuals for pleasure.

Of course this is impossible to quantify. If the success of her presentation depends entirely upon the [typically narrow] perspective of her beancounters, then I am not optimistic. What is at stake here is very important, indeed, because it touches upon the breadth or narrowness of the corporate philosophy in terms of how management perceives the relationship between the company and its customers.

It has become common in today's marketplace to reduce the customer/company interface to quantifiable specifics, and this extends to the very important and more subtle intangible called customer perception and satisfaction. Now to be entirely fair about this, I do concede that tech-support and customer-support hotlines are ubiquitous, but these usually are seen as very unwelcome expenses. The concept of customer support that management typically has is to monitor and analyze call traffic on these hotlines, and to repair or replace equipment that has failed under warranty.

Although the recorded messages always say "Your call is very important to us," the truth probably lies nearer to the Sylvia cartoon in which she programmed her answering machine to say "At the sound of the beep, please hang up!"

But if the customer does not make the call, then management is isolated and has no clue as to whether or not that customer is happy or dissatisfied with the company's products or services. The presumption that no news is good news is very, very mistaken.

For those who heap accolades upon Microsoft (I am not one of them), I acknowledge that the Redmond Rascals do/did conduct usability studies regarding their software, and might even have beta-tested user manuals (I am not sure about that). But if my experiences with Windows and Word are any measure of Microsoft's success in this venture, I suspect that the results of these usability tests are propping

up a short table leg somewhere in a Redmond warehouse ...

Now, I realize that with Internet entities such as Priceline.com nipping at one's corporate heels, and the relentless pressures of a savagely competitive international business environment, there is great incentive to cut costs. So every expenditure will be evaluated in terms of the expected return for the proposed investment. This is much more difficult than it seems, and still borders on witchcraft and the casting of entrails (sometimes the suggesting employee's entrails, but that is another story ...). But Einstein once observed that everything should be made as simple as possible, but not any simpler. Guessing wrong can be catastrophic (e.g., Firestone/Ford).

Unfortunately, the cultural impoverishment of persons brought up entirely on sitcoms and the Internet (an avalanche of information is not wisdom) also reinforces the simplistic conception that from the customer's viewpoint price competitiveness is the only meaningful criterion. In this climate, indexes might be seen as esoteric fluff found at the backs of grudgingly produced manuals.

Manuals are only one facet of the overall company-customer interface. But when the user is facing an intractable problem late at night on Sunday, when tech support is either unavailable or on endless hold, this facet can become very intense indeed. A good index cannot correct an incomplete and incomprehensible manual. But an inadequate or hastily written index

frustrates the user. He or she either is going to end that interaction with a sense of satisfaction, and will have been reinforced in the wisdom of the initial decision to buy that product, or will be frustrated and irritated and incrementally less likely to buy another of that company's products and go through a similar hassle of throwing down the manual and waiting hours on a tech-support hotline.

Even if the customer never thinks of this consciously and explicitly, the incremental reinforcement of satisfaction or frustration eventually will tell. So what is saved in skimping on the manual and the index can be lost farther downstream.

There is a concept of life-cycle cost that engaged the favor of the military many years ago. I suggest that there should be an analogous concept of life-cycle satisfaction. And in this conception, adequate user manuals and good indexes figure prominently.

This might not be beancounter quantifiable, but neither can the pleasure of a caress or the pain of a toothache. And both are very real.

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