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Why Won't We Read the Manual?

Stupid Question, Perhaps, but Manufacturers Have Heard Stupider

By *Caroline E. Mayer*
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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It's an old joke, but a spokesman for Gateway swears it's true -- that the computer maker's technical help line once got a call from a new purchaser complaining that her teacup kept slipping out of the computer's cup holder.

The reason, of course: The "cup holder" was the tray that slides out to hold a CD-ROM.

And so it has come to this: Americans buy the most sophisticated computers, the coolest digital cameras, the most advanced automobiles, the most versatile cell phones and handheld organizers, and then . . . and then we forget, or decline, or flat out refuse, to read the directions. Owner's manuals, care guides, how-to directories? No, thanks.

There are lots of theories about why, but one thing is certain: The situation is driving manufacturers nuts -- and costing them, and eventually all of us, money.

Consider Lee Battaglia of Vienna. He never reads



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directions for the computer and camera gear he buys. "It's too time-consuming and I'm impatient," the retired photographer said. "I'd rather watch someone else doing it and then I can ask why." And there's Fairfax schoolteacher Pam Grainer: "I'm a hands-on person; I learn by doing." Both would rather pay to take a course to learn how to use their new computers than do it on their own, from the detailed manual.

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Marketing experts, customer service consultants and corporate executives agree on the phenomenon. "There's no question that people are averse to reading the full instruction manuals -- that's a given these days," said Chuck Westfall, assistant director of the technical information department for Canon Inc., the camera and office-equipment manufacturer.

And that makes consumer-product companies the target of their customers' dissatisfaction. In fact, some manufacturers and retailers say consumers' failure to read directions has prompted returns of perfectly good items on grounds that they don't work -- or don't live up to the customer's expectations.

"Why doesn't my washing machine start?" (Is the lid closed?)

"Why won't my printer work?" (Is it plugged in? Is the ink cartridge properly installed? Is there paper?)

Those are among the "frequently asked questions" (and answers) contained in owner's manuals. But they're also the kinds of questions fielded by manufacturers' toll-free help lines. And companies say the cost of operating the call centers has mounted sharply as call volume has grown.

With each new question comes the nagging fear at many corporations that consumers will become frustrated and dissatisfied enough to swear off their products.

(But KitchenAid may not miss the woman -- a company spokesman vows this happened -- who called to ask which was the best spin cycle in her clothes washer for drying her lettuce. Then she wanted to know how to get the chlorophyll off the washer drum because it was staining her clothes green.)

Subaru of America Inc. has been struggling with this problem since it noticed consumer complaints about vehicle quality beginning to rise a few years ago.

"We scratched our heads trying to figure out why," said Joseph Barstys, manager of customer relationships. "As we further explored why, we realized it wasn't so much that things didn't work but that customers didn't know *how* to work" their vehicle and all the systems in it.

In fact, it turned out, 1 in 5 calls to the Subaru call center involved a

question answered in the owner's manual.

Subaru considered beefing up its toll-free customer service telephone lines but rejected the idea, Barstys said, partly because of cost and more significantly because "we needed to figure out a way to get information to customers in advance of their calls."

So Subaru boiled down its 450-page owner's manual to a glossy eight-panel folder, small enough to fit behind the visor, that addresses the most basic questions, such as how to work the lights and windshield wipers. (Other automakers are offering similar at-a-glance fold-out guides.)

Subaru still provides the standard manual, of course, but Barstys is realistic: "It's required by law, but it's common knowledge that people are typically not reading it. It's too long and sometimes too esoteric."

Subaru also has been encouraging its dealers to offer more orientation clinics to new owners. Some offer cake, coffee -- even babysitting -- while dealer employees demonstrate critical operating details, even putting the car on a lift. Subaru and other automakers also have highlighted what Barstys calls the "self-serve items" under the hood -- painting the receptacles for oil, brake fluid, windshield cleaner and other fluids in bright mustard yellow -- so car owners can find them without ever opening the owner's manual.

Experts on consumer behavior say Americans are more likely to read care guides for cars than for other consumer products. "The thing about cars is it's do or die -- you have to know how to use a car or how else do you get to work, go on a date?" said Richard Laermer, author of the book "TrendSpotting" and chief executive of the RLM public relations firm, whose clients are technology and publishing companies.

But Americans "won't read cell-phone manuals, any kitchen appliance manual" -- and forget the VCR manual," Laermer said. The PR executive knows what he's talking about. "Personally, I've bought a lot of stereo equipment, and I know they came with manuals -- I've got a whole file drawer full of them -- but I haven't read a single one. I want something that comes out of box that I can just plug in and it works."

But how realistic is that? Cell phones aren't just for making calls and taking messages -- they can serve as your daily calendar, your computer game center, even your biorhythm calculator. A two-cycle washing machine, regular and permanent press? That's so yesterday. One Maytag washer has added a jeans cycle and a towel cycle. If that's not enough, users can customize 24 different cycles so sweaters and pants can be treated differently.

And how do you figure out how to use all the fancy features of the latest and greatest gadgets? It's all in the manual.

"Over the last five to seven years, there has been a fairly dramatic increase in the number of features, functions and benefits of many

products, and as that complexity has increased, the propensity of consumers to sit down and wade through care guides and product manuals has exponentially decreased," said Charles Jones, vice president of global consumer design for Whirlpool Corp.

Whirlpool is among the companies that have been trying to come up with new ways to educate consumers -- with any luck, before consumers realize they are being taught. On some appliances, the manufacturer is plastering colorful stickers printed with simple directions that buyers can't miss when they're itching to get started.

In other cases, Whirlpool is giving customers videos -- but appliance-store sales clerks privately say that, based on the calls they get, consumers apparently don't sit down and watch them.

Whirlpool's goal is to design a product "so intuitive that it doesn't need specialized instructions, use and care guides," Jones said. In Europe, for example, Whirlpool is selling a dishwasher that comes with special software to communicate with the user. In a digital display, the machine first asks which language the user would prefer -- French, Dutch, English, Italian or German. Then, like some automated teller machines that ask a million questions before doling out the cash, it asks how many dishes are to be washed and what kind. Pots and pans? China? Crystal? The answers will determine the water temperature and volume and whether the machine needs to filter out hard minerals.

The moral there: You can learn to control technology -- or it will control you.

In the United States, Whirlpool is selling a microwave oven that asks consumers if they are preparing, say, a cooked or uncooked chicken, with or without bones, with or without sauce. The microwave will calculate the cooking time and method; all the user needs to do -- after answering all those questions, of course -- is push the start button and dish out the finished product.

In the not-too-distant future, many of those questions may prove unnecessary, at least for frozen dinners and such. Some microwaves are being designed to read a bar code that will be printed on the side of the package and cook it automatically. "The consumer won't even have to read directions on how long he needs to cook the meal; he'll just have to eat it," Laermer said.

Why Americans don't read directions is no mystery.

Like Laermer, consumers want instant satisfaction -- they don't want to wade through pages and pages of directions after they buy a product, especially if the directions are hard to understand or follow.

"Nobody's reading manuals because they are horribly written," said consumer consultant Tom Connellan, a customer-loyalty expert. Often written by the engineers who designed the product and bylawyers for the manufacturer, the manuals are usually not written with the consumer in

mind, he added. And if the product is made abroad, there's a good chance some of the manual is an incomprehensible translation from a foreign language.

But even when the manuals are easy to understand, they may not be entertaining enough for today's consumer, especially younger ones who have grown up with the fast-paced world of MTV, computer games and the Internet. They are used to having information delivered in a rapid, colorful and stimulating way, and they want directions to be equally snappy.

"Manuals just slow you down and make you feel stupid," said Neil Fiore, a Berkeley, Calif., psychologist and executive coach. "The directions are too slow, too detailed, and use too much abstract, arcane or academic language -- like 'boot up' instead of 'turn on the red switch in the back.' "

Companies have belatedly realized that their toll-free help lines contribute to the problem, helping consumers avoid the intimidating manuals. Tony Sweers, product quality engineer for Canon Information Technology Services, noted: "It appears that when a lot of people see that an 800 number is available, they find it much easier to call than to sit down and read the manual."

Robert Walton, vice president for quality and customer care at Compaq Computer Corp. (now part of Hewlett-Packard Co.), said he believes the reluctance to read instructions "is very much an American problem," whereas "in other countries, people love to read manuals." For Japanese buyers, for example, Compaq "spent a tremendous amount of time to come up with thorough, top-notch trade manuals -- several times thicker than the ones produced in the United States -- with a lot of text and diagrams. It looks more like an engineering book than a manual," Walton said.

Americans' reluctance to read the manuals can be costly for companies, Walton noted. "It was very frustrating to us -- and very expensive" to answer the consumer phone calls, he said. "We were getting millions of calls, and over half of those were 'how to' questions, many of which could have been answered in the documentation that came with the computer."

Determined to cut costs and improve customer satisfaction, Compaq made a couple of key changes a little over a year ago. With each new computer, Compaq now packs a colorful Quick Setup poster that has few words and large pictures to illustrate the steps in starting it up. (It also helps that the industry now color-codes plugs and receptacles so consumers can quickly figure out which goes where).

Compaq has engineered the start-up process so that new owners get a welcome message from the company when they first sign on to the Internet. The note directs them to a Web site where answers to many of the common questions can be found. Customers can use the site to e-mail other questions, and Compaq tries to respond within an hour.

Although Walton said the company had no precise numbers, these features "have clearly helped" relieve congestion at the customer service telephone center.

Like the poster that Compaq and other computer manufacturers pack with their gear, quick-start guides -- small pamphlets with lots of pictures and easy-to-follow diagrams -- are now included with most new electronic gear.

Canon used to put its quick-start directions at the front of the larger manuals, thinking the buyer might at least open it. Now there's a separate quick-start booklet; it is the first thing consumers see when they open the box.

While Sweers said it's too early to tell how effective the quick-start booklets are, he does say that calls to the hotline have dropped.

It's not only manufacturers who are struggling with growing reluctance to read manuals. Service firms, such as health insurance companies, also see that trend.

"We know people don't read the benefit book when they sign the contract" or get their health insurance policy from their employer, said Pamela T. Miller, vice president for enterprise strategy and quality for Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey. "We also know that people get dissatisfied most when they have an incorrect perception of their benefits or misuse them -- and then somehow" find they owe money on procedures they thought would be covered.

That's why Horizon has started calling new members and spends 15 to 30 minutes going over the benefits books to make sure they know which kind of health plan they are in (health-maintenance organization or preferred-provider plan) and helping them understand what costs they might have to incur and how they can save money by using certain preapproved doctors or facilities.

"People love it," said Miller. "We've watched our customer satisfaction and retention rate go up dramatically." Customer satisfaction used to be in the high 60 percent range but now is around 85, and Horizon is now retaining 88 percent of its customers, up from a low around 70 percent, Miller said.

Earlier this month Lee Battaglia and Pam Grainer were dealing with their learning curve by taking a three-hour computer course in Fairfax. Organizer of the course? Gateway, maker of the home computers Battaglia and Grainer had just bought.

Providing alternatives to manuals is one way companies believe they can differentiate themselves from their competitors. That's one reason Gateway started an online service and hands-on training sessions. "It benefits us and the user," said Gateway spokesman Greg Lund. "If we can make them happy, they'll want to come back and buy from us again when they're ready to buy another computer."

And that's just fine with customers like Battaglia.

"Teach us as much as you can," he told the trainer. He laughed and then quickly added: "Well, teach us as much as we can retain."

And guess what: The owner's manual was free; the course cost \$99.

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