

Should Companies Combine Marketing and Technical Content to Adapt to the Shift in UX Expectations?

Saran Kante, Clémence Bolinga, Dina Radaoarisoa

July 2017

Abstract

Companies put customers' needs at the center of their strategy to build a relation of trust and increase customer's loyalty to their products. In their effort, companies become more and more prone to offer customers a linear experience from the moment they are attracted by the perspective of buying a product or service (marketing) up to after their buying act when they start using the product or service (technical communication). The quality of both marketing and technical content is crucial.

We wanted to have an insight of what experts of technical communication and marketing think of a possibility for these two services to collaborate. In order to get this information we interviewed professionals from these two fields, we attended conferences and seminars on the subject of combining technical content with marketing content to unify customer experience.

Companies undertaking such a change should thoroughly study the transition process, the product and the profit.

One of the challenges a company would face is how to make two services that are used to working separately pool their skills to achieve a common goal which is to provide their users a high quality service. The credibility customers grant to a company depends on it.

Because the two services use their own terminology to achieve their respective goals, they would need to reach an agreement on the terms they are both going to use to produce their content.

Keywords: UX, marketing, strategy, technical writing, content design, customers.

Introduction

While technical documentation helps customers use complex products, marketing attracts customers and make them buy a product. During the past few years, customers' requirements have incredibly risen. To maintain a balance in the relationship between customers and companies, departments must work together to provide a smooth user experience. User experience is the usability and accessibility of a product.

Marketing and technical documentation are both creating content directly for the customer, therefore their role is very important within an organization.

The quality of documentation is primordial for the customer. If customers don't know how to use a product, they will be reluctant to buy products from the company. On the other hand, marketing content with poor information about the product can be misleading and make a company lose its customers. On the long run, this misunderstanding can do damage to a company.

In their effort to put customers' needs at the center of their strategy, some companies are trying to break the silos between their departments, and decided to merge their marketing and documentation departments. Their goal is to create new content that is a mixture of marketing and technical documentation to help:

- Marketers have more knowledge about the product they want to sell to customers.
- Technical writers create more user-centered documentation.

Technical communication and marketing have the unique power of being coordinators between a customer and a company, as they are the few departments that communicate directly with the customer through content. The quality of their services can strengthen or weaken a relationship. Usually, technical communication and marketing services rarely communicate amongst themselves. They have so little knowledge about each other's work that it increases the distance between them, and between the company and its customers.

As a result, there is a gap in the customer's journey between the moment they buy the product, and when they start using it. During seven months, we participated to conferences, webinars and interviewed professionals in the documentation and marketing field to understand whether merging technical documentation and marketing could bridge the gap in the user experience. We also tried to determine if the merge could help companies adapt to the shift in customers' needs.

Methodology

To carry out our research article and give a qualitative aspect to it, we decided to conduct interviews with experienced technical writers and people working in the marketing department. We established a set of questions to ask them:

- 1) What are the main similarities between marketing and documentation?
- 2) How a fusion of marketing and documentation services could increase user experience (UX)? Are there any disadvantages to a fusion between technical communication and marketing?
- 3) What are the challenges a company is expected to face if a merge occurs?
- 4) What is the most important thing technical communicators can learn from marketers?

These questions were designed to give us an insight of how the two departments perceive one another's employment and what are their opinions on combining marketing content with technical content to unify user experience strategy.

We interviewed:

- Noz Urbina: He is a consultant specialized in the management of marketing and technical content. A chat was organized and we had the opportunity to ask questions regarding our research article.
- Carol Jackson: She works at Dassault Systèmes - a software company - as the head of the documentation department for the DELMIA brand.

In addition to these interviews we attended a conference held at the University of Paris Diderot during which experts came to explain how they work towards breaking silos in their organization whether it is a company or university. We were particularly interested in Scott Mogull's presentation during which he explained how - as a technical writer and marketing manager - he failed at trying to combine marketing and technical communication in a product documentation. His experience gave us possible grounds to the extent of the limits of the collaboration between the two departments.

Then we listened to a webinar called *Technical Documentation = Marketing* where Berry Braster - Technology Director, Technical Documentation at Etteplan - explained how companies are becoming aware of the fact that the documentation of a product is as essential as the product itself.

We also attended the Documentation Fair where representative from Adobe talked about the benefits of combining technical content and marketing content and how their company is envisaging doing this transition.

Finally we discussed our problematic with Ray Gallon and Andy McDonald during a seminar held at the University of Paris Diderot and they gave us ideas and tracks to look deeper into.

The points of view of these specialists were of great value to our research since understanding and giving customers what they want and what they need is at the heart of their professions. On the one hand the marketing department's goal is to encourage consumption around the product of the company they work for. On the other hand, once customers buy a product they want to know how to use it. That is when the technical writer comes in to get users understand how to use a product. Their work is complementary.

Results

Interview with a marketing and documentation specialist

Noz Urbina, an expert content strategist, content modeler and customer experience consultant supports the idea that marketing and technical writing should merge to improve user experience.

During our interview, he explained that Marketing and Documentation are the two communication weapons of a business. They both build relationship with the user and have similar requirements. For example, call centers and support teams often rely on technical communication to help users. Technical documentation should speak more to other services in a company so that it can be reused for other purposes, and a company should align its departments to match its customer's requirements. Communication and content are two of the fastest delivering industries on the planet so they should work together to meet customers' requirements.

When asking how to succeed a merge of technical communication and marketing, he recommended companies to think and reuse technical communication in the right context. Force-feeding customers with wrong content when it's not necessary can make your company lose credibility. A company should first understand the tone of the customer, and then focus on the customer journey to decide when to put content. Using technical content at any moment will be perceived as selling in the wrong context.

A company will face many challenges when trying to merge its technical communication and marketing services. Human beings are the biggest challenges a company will face. *"If they come together and there's no strategy in term of the overall strategy, there's going to be a power struggle between the different managers."* he added.

Technical writers should be more explicit and adapt their language, find the right way to communicate about what they do in technical writing. Technical writers and other departments should understand that there are more behind marketing than what people

think (strategy, integrity, etc.), marketing has lots of similarities with technical communication, but the terminology used to communicate is different.

To move forward with a merge of technical communication and marketing, breaking the language barrier is the most important step. Make a difference between learning time and doing time. There is technical documentation designed to support learning and documentation to do things. Consistency and accuracy is also very important. A company should be customer focus and not product focus. Do not think about the deliverable. Marketing can be tone deaf by focusing on selling at the wrong time and technical writers can be tone deaf by focusing on the deliverable. Marketing and documentation should be fast, accurate and invisible to the customer (Urbina).

We asked Urbina to detail what technical communication can learn from marketing, and he answered:

- Relationship building: How to building trust and confidence to the brand.
- The web for documentation physical design. How to build content whose design is adapted for the web.
- How to take advantage of the web.
- When to use a third party for information.
- How to leverage modern technologies.

Intersection of technical communication and marketing genres: spanning silos through product documentation

During a technical writing conference, Scott Mogull, a technical writer, product manager, and marketing manager explained how he tried to break the silos within his company in the biotechnical industry. He created the “Application guide” a hyper-genre book merging technical communication and marketing.

Through the description of his personal experience, he explained how technical writers might be able to break down traditional silos. Why and how they should align their work with other departments, specifically the marketing department. Finally he talked about the positives and negatives of the merge for within and outside the organization.

According to him, technical writers should consider rewriting their product documentation within the technical communication silo to align their work to business objectives of larger organizations.

To solve this issue, he conceived the application guide: a multi-genre book combining marketing content (brochure, newsletter) with instructions manuals and scientific articles.

He explained why his project failed and what could have been made to make it succeed. The application guide contained several promotional content made by himself, 17 instructions manuals written by technical writers, and three technical newsletter articles written by scientific writers. In total, it formed a 200 pages long book.

The target audience was scientific researchers in universities, and from the biotechnical industry. The goal of the book was to promote and explain how to conduct a laboratory research.

Because the field was new, most of the potential customers could not understand what this technology was about. The application guide had many goals, it was meant to be informative, persuasive, and instructive. The title was chosen because it appealed to customers' needs to know how to use the technology, but also because it was vague and could strike curiosity. Moreover, it showed how the information within the book could all fit together, and could be used for research.

Analogy of the project

On the technical side, there was a set of instructions for specific products. Marketing and technical writing had different objectives, and the content created was made to meet both. The goal of technical documentation was to teach the user how to use the product while marketing wanted to increase sales and profits.

The guide would have provided instructions on a smaller scale to make the products more understandable for customers. Instead of giving instructions for all products, there would have been instructions for each product.

From a marketing perspective, Mogull intended to increase the level of credibility that instructions would have over basic promotional material. The marketing are often discarded whereas the instructions material would be something they need to use for the 17 products.

The book was not a success and it was not easy to implement. The process was complicated and there were unanticipated objections from individuals. He says he should have discussed with the different teams and listen the objections of those involved in the process.

He was focused on the potential external effects of the application guide, while the technical writing team was worried about the number of instruction manuals. Also, an application guide costs more to produce than a regular guide, and a decision had to be made for who would pay the production costs.

Internal implementation and distribution to customers

The internal implementation failed. It was very complicated, and there were unanticipated objections. A lot of compromises had to be done. Looking back, he thinks he should have created a dialog with the stakeholders of the application guide. However from his marketing perspective at the time, he was more focused on the potential effect that the genre would have on customers and on the market. He did not focus on the effects it could generate internally, and this was a critical mistake.

The main group rejecting the application guide was the documentation team formed by three technical writers and a manager. Manufacturing was another unexpected struggle; the book costed more to produce than the traditional manual. It was larger so space, storage, and shipping were more difficult.

Mogull had to negotiate so that the marketing team would pay for the application guide but this could create other issues. They would have to create different catalogs because they did not want to provide an application guide for every customer who ordered the product in case there were returning customers. It would also be a big problem for customer service that would have to manage multiple catalogs. One catalog for the product with the

application guide, some catalogs with the product without the application guide for the whole series of product.

If the implementation took place, technical services would be problematic too, and possibly other product managers within the organization.

Breaking down silos through genre change is a disruptive process, it can be done but many individuals in organization can be touched beyond what you might originally imagine.

What was decided

Cost was the main argument against the production of the application guide. The project was implemented but as a marketing document that was distributed customers.

He concluded by saying that genre change is a disruptive force throughout an organization for multiple groups and individuals that have become accustomed to a particular norm. Such change threatens the agency, process and even profits of an organization. There should be more communication with all the parties involved, and a deeper look at the process, the product, and the profit.

Hybrid Information and trans-media in the industry 4.0

During the Documation Fair in Paris on March 30th, 2017, Adobe announced that the company was merging its marketing and technical documentation services. They said companies understand more that the pre-purchase experience and post-purchase experience should be linear. That is what companies are interested in because it creates brand loyalty and encourages customers to buy other products from the company. They created hybrid information: it is communication between humans and machines. For example, a chatbot or information stored as data. Transmedia communication requires that a person uses several platforms to share information (it starts with a video, then we discuss on forums and end up on the radio). We were also introduced to the concept of "Internet 4.0" which is the reunion of hybrid and trans-media information.

A seminar on information 4.0

Ray Gallon and Andy McDonald, two documentation design strategists and co-founders of the Information 4.0 consortiums expressed their thoughts about merging marketing and technical content. They said that in a unified content strategy, people have to agree on the common denominators. The terminology used to designate the product should be the same. There has to be shared tools and experiences between everyone working on the product. It creates harmony, and encourages the customer to participate in the production process.

There can be conflicts between marketing and technical writers in the merging process needs, and this should be monitored carefully to avoid miscommunication and make sure both teams work together smoothly.

Using simple English words can help to make sure the content is understandable for every team. It is also a way for technical content to promote the product. If the content is easy to understand, the customer relates more to the product.

In the medical industry, marketing pulls information from user manuals to create content. It is the contrary for other industry. They need content about customers from the marketing to write documentation. They added that information should be able to go beyond media. The delivery mechanism is different but mechanism does not change. Responsive design: also needs to be pushed one step further, that's why adaptive web design was created (Gallon and McDonald).

During an interview, Adeline Albeaux a Technical Documentation Team manager explained that before, the technical writing department of Air Liquide Medical Systems worked independently. One and a half years ago, the company decided to merge their marketing and technical writing departments, and this change permitted both departments to work in a more structured way; they obtained more information about the product and simplified their content to adapt it to the users. She said, « A documentation written in a structured way helps to promote the brand. According to the product, the user will be different. With the emergence of digital age, it is logical that both departments work together.”

Discussions

Companies should consider merging marketing and technical writing

In a bid to bridge the gap in the user experience between the pre-sale and post-sale process, companies like Adobe or Air Liquide Medical Systems companies decided to merge their marketing and technical writing departments. The aim was not to erase any of the technical or marketing existing content, but to create additional content mixing the two that can provide more consistent, accurate and relevant information to help the customer understand and use the product. After customers buy a product, there should be a service or content making sure the customer does not feel abandoned in his journey.

Tom Johnson, a California based technical writer said *“Technical writers should repurpose their information-rich content into content marketing deliverables that can be used to build relationships with potential audiences in the market. This content can help establish thought leadership, visibility, and trust with your audience so that when you start releasing and mentioning your 1.0 product, your audience adopts it.”*

This statement joins Noz Urbina and Adobe’s arguments in favor of a merge of technical communication and marketing. Technical communication and marketing can together help build trust between a company and its customers. They also have information that is shared, can help them produce more customer needs-focused content.

Doug Moran, an author, technical writer and marketing manager explained in an article that marketing and technical writing presented five reasons why marketing and technical communication belongs together.

First reason, technical content teams must understand the product and the customer. Technical writers have to understand the product and the engineering behind products. For example what are the customers’ wishes, needs and how they are most likely to use the product. Working with the marketing department is a good way to have that information, and to produce more customer-focused content.

Second reason, technical writers can serve as a bridge. Marketers can, with technical content, have a greater understanding of products. It can also facilitate their relationship with the engineering teams.

Third reason, marketing holds the customer insights. With all the information about customers that marketing holds, technical writer will not have to figure out by themselves how the customer will use the product. Both departments can also collaborate for researches and case studies of customers to give a new insight to the marketing strategy.

Fourth reason, the customer gets a more consistent story. Including messages from the marketing department in your technical content can make the overall story of a product more consistent. Companies will also have more credibility. The different departments of a company have different goals and different message to give to the customer. Technical writers can help marketing materials have more technical credibility. It makes the customer more comfortable and gives a better impression on the product.

Fifth reason, marketing is becoming more technical. As the choice for products is increasing, customers are being more exigent so marketers have to be more technical to show the customers they have the product corresponding to their needs. Including technical content in marketing can help marketing teams adapt more quickly to the shift.

Although merging marketing and technical content is an innovative idea, it can also be a challenge for companies internally and externally.

Challenges companies can face during the merge

A collaboration between marketing and technical communication can be considered an innovative evolution to writing product content. Customers are used to finding promotional content apart from documentation of a product they need to be guided through this transformation. In order to avoid losing more than saving time and money in their

transformation, companies need to take into account a few points before doing these changes.

An organization seeking such a way of working may face difficulties and challenges trying to achieve this. For years and years each of these two departments have been working separately. Yet as David Pukulis, Director of Marketing for K15t Software GmbH, wrote *“Technical communication and content marketing have a defined goal in common: to deliver high-quality content that helps people solve problems.”* (Pukulis).

First of all the communication with and between every agent involved in the transformation process - in our case study technical writers and marketers - is essential. The combination of two different genres must be something other than a compromise (Mogull). The objective, as described by David Pukulis, is to achieve a common goal by giving each party equivalent chance, resources so that their opinion is taken into account and valued and nobody is left behind.

There is a gap in marketing and technical communication content. On one hand marketing focuses on attracting potential users by advertising why a particular product or service is designed to satisfy their needs. On the other hand technical writing addresses the needs of existing customers by being logical and practical to help them perform a task and understand the product or service they are using as summed up by David Pukulis *“The essence of the gap between techcomm and marketing are these differing approaches of 'how' and 'why'.”*

This difference in approaching customers' needs is represented by the way both services write content: appealing vocabulary for marketing against practical and procedures for technical communication. Combining these two particular writing styles into one that values the product based on the technical development is the essential point. Users must not get lost by contradictions or different terms to express the same idea when they read one documentation or the other.

Industries where a merge is fundamental

During an interview, Carol Jackson, one of Dassault Systèmes' head of documentation department, said there is a difference between products sold to companies, and products sold to the public. In companies, the person who buys the product is rarely the one who ends up using it. Whereas when an individual buys a product, it is very often for their own personal use.

Therefore, it is more difficult to find reliable information about who is going to use the product in marketing. The content and information they have, targets people in companies who are not the end-users. Whereas when you sell products to the public, you know exactly who is going to buy your product and why they need it for.

In this case, a merge of technical communication and marketing is useful only if a company targets the public sector or companies small enough that the person who buys the product is the one who is going to use it.

Ray Gallon and Andy McDonald explained during an intervention that companies from the medical sector need technical content for their marketing materials. Depending on the audience you target, you might need to add technical content to attract customers. If a company targets a highly specialized audience, customers' need more detailed and technical information to decide if the products meet their needs. The technical documentation and marketing departments must work together to create content that can both attract customers and satisfy users. Highly technical products requires stronger marketing content that already gives an insight about how to use the product, and it also needs very user-centered documentation. Technical writers must know exactly who the target audience is to make sure the user uses the product properly. In the medical industry, a not user-centered documentation can lead to irreversible damages. Therefore, a collaboration between marketing and technical writers is primordial.

Conclusion

Companies understand that users' expectations are rising. The number of products available increased and so does users expectations about products. Companies have a shorter amount of time to convince customers that they have they need, and help them use their product if they want to maintain brand loyalty.

In industries where products are highly technical, the content created for customers has to be promotional and technical. Companies try to unify their technical communication and marketing departments to create more user friendly content and maintain brand loyalty. As the two main intermediaries between companies and customers, marketing and technical communication departments should work hand in hand to meet customers' requirements. They both create content for customers, and need to have a deeper understanding of their target audience. They also have tools and information that if put together, they can help produce a higher quality of content.

Unifying content helps address the customer with one voice, one tone, and provide a unique message the customer understands and can relies on. This consistency reassures the customer and makes them feel more comfortable in his user experience journey.

Although merging the two departments is a good solution, it can be a struggle to implement in a company. The biggest challenge is that employees will have to adjust to a change of organization they have been accustomed to work to. Adapting to an organization change can be difficult and challenging.

Making sure the different actors speak the same language and terminology is the first step in making the merge successful. Communication with and between both departments can help avoid unpredicted organizational behaviors. A company must also provide a common goal for the two departments so that they understand they are working towards the same objectives.

Works Cited

Braster, Berry. "Technical Documentation = Marketing." Vimeo, uploaded by CIDM Event Recordings, 23 February 2017, vimeo.com/205407453/421145994b.

Johnson, Tom. "What is the technical writer's role in content marketing?" 4 January 2016, <http://idratherbewriting.com/2016/01/04/content-marketing-to-the-rescue-for-thought-leadership/>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

Mogull, Scott. "Intersection of technical communication and marketing genres: spanning silos through product documentation." 5th International Conference on Technical Communication - Beyond Silos, 3 February 2017, University of Paris Diderot, Paris, Conference Presentation.

Moran, Doug. "Why Technical Content and Marketing Belong Together." 6 January 2015, <https://www.rivaliq.com/blog/technical-content-marketing/>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

Pukulis, David. "Better together: technical writers and content marketers." <http://www.tcworld.info/e-magazine/content-strategies/article/better-together-technical-writers-and-content-marketers/>. Accessed 30 July 2017.

Pukulis, David. "TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION & CONTENT MARKETING: MIND THE GAP." k15t, www.k15t.com/blog/2017/03/technical-communication-content-marketing-mind-the-gap. Accessed 30 July 2017.

Urbina, Noz. Personal Interview. 7 April 2017. <https://comtechp7.hypotheses.org/category/collaborating>

The Purdue OWL Family of Sites. The Writing Lab and OWL at Purdue and Purdue U, 2008, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

About the authors

Clémence Bolinga is a French technical writer. she obtained a bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages while passing a certificate in French Business Law. During her first year of master's degree, she spent 6 months in Ireland through an Erasmus exchange where she studied Irish law. Desirous of acquiring skills in technical writing and programming, she started a study training program of master's degree in technical communication at the University of Paris Diderot. During this year she worked at Dassault Systèmes, a software company, as an apprentice user assistance developer and graduated in 2017.

Saran Kante is a French technical writer with a background in content marketing, international management, and English literature. She worked and studied in different countries including Canada, Great Britain and the United States. After a first year of a master in international management, she did a shift in her career plan and decided to specialize in technical writing and multimedia content design. She worked as an apprentice user assistant developer at Dassault Systèmes for a year in 2017, while also pursuing a freelance web designer career.