

Technical Writing — Should You “Do It Yourself?”

You’ve carefully nurtured your fledgling enterprise into existence. You know the value of your product and service as it relates to your market better than anyone. But, are YOU the best choice to develop, write and produce product literature (brochures, flyers and advertising) that will enhance your sales and future company development? You very well could be.

by A. Carroll Burgess

As a proud “parent” of your young company you possess the enthusiasm and energy to translate the product for potential users and buyers. You know the strengths and weaknesses associated with your product. And, you passionately believe in its viability. Combine those qualities with a generous amount of common sense and you’ll find that writing about your product is not as difficult as it initially appears.

First, remember that the primary goal of your written material is to help people understand the information and ideas that you are presenting. Have you ever struggled with the directions for an “easy to assemble” toy on Christmas Eve?

Form a mental picture in your mind of that frustrated toy assembler as you compose your material and remember that your document is designed for a first time user. Strive for accuracy, simplicity, clarity, completeness and integrity.

ACCURACY begins with organization. Gather together all of the elements and information you want to convey and create an outline for your document. Taking time to organize your material will help you find the “holes.” Is the information spread out over several areas? Is the information unclear, inaccurate or unneeded? Your outline should become your road map for the directions your consumer needs.

SIMPLICITY in writing is the ability to be direct, precise and easily understood. Use terms, abbreviations and symbols that are familiar to your users. Don’t clutter your document with unneeded words and phrases. Don’t try to tie together too many points at one time. Write several short sentences instead of one long and rambling one that will confuse your reader.

CLARITY means making your document clear and simple to use. For example, say “This won’t work if it’s bent.” Not, “A proper functioning of this component is critically dependent upon its maintaining dimensional integrity.” Be specific in your use of terms don’t use “often” if you mean “daily.” Most importantly, be consistent in your use of technical and non-technical terms. Using different words for the same thing gives variety, but it also causes misunderstandings.

COMPLETENESS means being fair to your reader or user. Make certain you include enough information in the document so that a trained person can use it by itself, without having to refer to other material or other persons. Don’t scatter related information in different sections. Don’t omit essential information because it’s “obvious.” Sometimes we need to be reminded as well as informed.

INTEGRITY is the most essential element of your product literature. Don’t ignore, gloss over, or cover up unpleasant details. Don’t lie or exaggerate. Not even once! If you do, readers will suspect everything else that you say. Give the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

One truth is that after you’ve organized your material, checked it for accuracy, simplified your terms, clarified your directions, scrutinized it for completeness and honesty, you just may not want to be the one to write the document.

Contracting with a professional writer or "wordsmith" does not mean that you are illiterate or incompetent. Using the services of a professional writer is much like calling in a plumber. You have a particular problem that you need solved. Keep in mind, however, that you, like the homeowner with a water-logged basement, know your property best. A good writer will work with you to present your material in the most accurate,

consistent and complete manner. But you alone make the final decisions. After all, this is your product and your integrity that's at stake. ■

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