

New Roles for Technical Writers: Technical Marketing Communication

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Technical software marketing is a specialty that calls upon skills technical writers already possess. Clear, accurate product information is essential in today's complex market; decision-makers need to know how your software will fulfill their business needs. In making the shift from documentation to marketing writing, it is necessary to broaden your sense of the writing's purposes, and prepare for different ways of working with your material. However, many key aspects of the two specialties are the same, such as the need to uphold a consistent, well-defined tone and organization, and above all to strive for consistency and clarity.

If you document computer software and want to make a career change, software marketing is a natural choice. It calls upon communication and product skills that you already have, and enables you to put these existing skills to work in new ways.

Writing for the increasingly complex software market requires you to understand both the technical dimensions of your product and the best ways to present your product. In today's market, if you simply tell your customers that your software does certain things, you raise questions: Which functions are robust and which are minimal? Which functions do I really need? How will the software integrate with my existing systems and business processes? What protects me from poor performance and system crashes?

The decision-makers who ask these questions know their business needs well, but don't know the detailed software protocols that can fill these needs. Therefore, you must explain your product in terms of user tasks and user benefits, supplying only enough implementation details to prove your case. Your purpose is persuasion; description and explanation (though useful) are secondary.

As a technical marketing writer, you may find yourself doing a wide variety of work: writing brochures and descriptive papers, editing and updating marketing collateral, writing articles for the trade press, and helping create processes that made all this happen smoothly.

Marketing is a collaborative effort. Ideas flow freely, and much of what you write may come of brainstorming with your colleagues. Information may be cut and pasted from a variety of sources. A shift in campaign focus can render your entire document useless, but with reorganization it

may fit into next month's campaign. Flexibility helps, as does the ability to work with a variety of reviewers.

Although the marketing community has different expectations than the programming community, the similarities between the two kinds of writing are great. Both specialties work with the same highly technical material. Technical marketing writing requires every bit as much accuracy and precision as technical documentation, even when the desired effect is breezy informality.

Attention to purpose, tone, and organization is essential to both types of writing. The purpose of documentation is usually straightforward: to present clear information that helps people perform specific software tasks. This requires a neutral, impersonal, mildly positive tone, with an organization that follows the logic of product interface or task. Rather than varying these elements, the technical writer applies them consistently.

The purposes of marketing material are more varied and need to be clearly defined at the start of the writing project, often as a collaborative effort. Once the purpose is clear, the major question becomes, "What organization and tone best suit this purpose?" Every project requires a unique tone and organization, depending on its purpose and desired effect. Once these issues are settled, though, the writer's job is to apply the given tone and organization.

In spite of the differences, consistency and clarity are the bottom line for good marketing, just as they are for good documentation. Customers need a clear understanding of the software you are asking them to invest in. It's your job to ensure they understand the product's capabilities, and how it will solve their business concerns, large or small.

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