



Provide better instructional tools that offer real value to partners

By John A. Gentle, DLP

"Mom, can you change the time on my watch?" "Sure... bring it over, it should only take a few seconds."

THAT WAS THE BEGINNING of a needless and frustrating period when a better set of instructional tools from the watch manufacturer on how to reset the time could have offered immediate value to my family—and would've eliminated two weeks of trial and error that tested me and my wife, who happens to be a Ph.D.

So, the question is: Why was this simple task so difficult that it took us so long to do? The answer is twofold: First, the manufacturer did not want to spend money to make the instructions more complete and easier to understand; and, second, it did not want to make the technology more intuitive.

This brings me to the challenge of "ineffective instructions" that logistics teams create for their suppliers, especially for how vendors are expected to complete forms, input data, and operate software that was provided by your company for warehouse and trucking operations, billing, and reporting.

Understanding how people learn as well as the nature of the information being shared, the operating environment, and the typical skill sets of the users are all important factors in the development of your instructional tools. We all want to continue to drive factual input down to the least costly, practical skill set levels where they can be performed efficiently and effectively with superior first pass yield.

Regardless of mental aptitude and acuity, some individuals learn by reading, others by listening, and others by repetitive hands-on trial and error, hence training needs to be created to accommodate the broad spectrum of operational users with differing learning styles. Most importantly, training needs to be provided without taking real-time away from your

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operational teams; and suppliers need to educate their new or temporary employees in terms of minutes, not days or weeks, and without the presence of the person charged with performing the tasks.

So, what to do? Over time, I have found that a written text for each form using numbered step-by-step instructions and accompanying screen shot pictures, along with voice-over, gave me the greatest opportunity to provide successful training for my business partners in the shortest period of time—and without my team becoming actively engaged.

Originally CDs were created and sent to our suppliers. Later, I made the information and related changes available in a downloadable format for my partners via our logistics website. This step further reduced the need for expensive administrative interaction and mailing costs.

By this time you are probably saying that this is too much work. Perhaps, but it made it a lot easier to overcome the conventional argument about introducing new business partners, and it facilitated and

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minimized the manpower needed to communicate document changes and information requirements.

If you are inclined to pursue an approach like this, I would suggest that a development team should be comprised of: a company individual who understands the document and has previously interacted with the suppliers at the operational level; a company resource who has voice-over experience and the appropriate technology; an IT resource to attach it to your logistics website; and most importantly, three or four supplier users with different learning styles who can help develop the scripts and provide answers to the FAQs.

It's time to design and use better tools to provide instructions that offer real value to your partners. □