

Technical Communication Departments Equal Higher Profits

Simply put, a corporation's bottom line (or net income) is equal to its "total revenue – costs." Typically, the technical communication department is in the "cost" bucket – the number that shrinks the bottom line on spreadsheets. However, there is more to a spreadsheet line item than meets the eye. In this article, I will discuss how technical communication departments actually increase the bottom line by increasing sales, streamlining processes, and *reducing costs* in a variety of ways.

Of course, content is the most important technical communication department deliverable, and no product or service would be usable without it. However, the very nature of the work requires knowledge and responsibilities that span across departments as diverse as development, marketing, QA, sales, and customer support. That domain and corporate knowledge provides additional value that can lead to higher profits.

Value Proposition

To detail the responsibilities and skill sets of our profession in terms that are significant to employers, the Society for Technical Communication (STC) defines *technical communicator* to the Bureau of Labor Statistics as follows:

"Develop and design instructional and informational tools needed to assure safe, appropriate and effective use of science and technology, intellectual property, and manufactured products and services. Combine multi-media knowledge and strong communication skills with technical expertise to educate across the entire spectrum of users' abilities, technical experience, and visual and auditory capabilities."

This description covers what technical communicators do. Now let's talk about the additional value-add technical communicators bring to the table, including:

- Improve products in a variety of ways not limited to the documentation. A better product is more likely to sell.
- Have in-depth knowledge of industry-specific standards and processes. This helps ensure compliance, save time, and meet deadlines.
- Have domain knowledge about documentation tools, technologies, and processes that save information development time as well as vendor costs.
- Constantly improve internal communication/knowledge-management efforts.
- Increase customer satisfaction, since better information improves the customer support experience.
- Develop social-media strategies for the company overall and/or for documentation deliverables.

Technical communicators design and develop information based on a set of constraints that are unique to each situation, using a mix of skills to deliver the appropriate information to the audience, in the shortest time. Along the way, these other goals are achieved.

Because each company is unique, not every technical communicator department is involved in all of these efforts, but most are everyday contributions. Some examples that seem specific to software documentation can be applied to other industries.

Increasing Sales

Technical communicators make the product better, which can increase sales. They do this by improving usability, being informal members of the Quality Assurance team, developing internal and external training, and yes: documentation.

The customer experience is an important component of sales. Improving software usability can be approached a variety of ways, but mostly falls into two camps: **before** (during design requirements) or **after** the fact.

Technical communicators can work in either methodology. For example:

- During design/usability testing, they can suggest workflow and user interface improvements, because they are very familiar with the way customers use the product.
- After code is written, communicators can still implement other suggestions, such as ways to embed information, improve wording, and design wizards.

Example:

At my current job, I was involved in the user interface design for our Doc-To-Help product. I suggested that we incorporate a dynamic Help pane to improve the customer experience and helped design it. I also worked with development to determine the best way to integrate all user assistance deliverables into the interface. This improved usability and also made user assistance options more visible to customers.

Often, technical communicators work very closely with SMEs (subject matter experts), such as the Quality Assurance (QA) and development teams. Since communicators work through processes as they write, it is common to find problems and other issues to report. To accommodate this collaborative effort, some companies provide a formal bug-tracking system, while others might just rely on emails to SMEs. Either way, the quality of the product is improved when communicators contribute to the overall QA process.

Live/online training and eLearning are crucial to the success of both internal and external customers. Generally, technical communicators are the first to tackle internal training, which is crucial to any project's success. If a company does not have a dedicated training department, technical communicators often develop the formal external training courses and eLearning. Since well-trained customers usually purchase additional products or provide positive recommendations, the training component can affect future sales.

As we all know, documentation is no longer exclusively manuals and online Help. Other deliverables include video, podcasts, customer forums, blogs, knowledgebase content, and more. Deciding the best deliverables for the audience and the development methodology requires strategic planning. Technical communicators use their expertise with customers, as well as tools and technologies, to make the best decisions to provide deliverables that benefit the audience and contribute to their success.

These wide-ranging initiatives (usability, QA, training, documentation analysis) improve products from multiple angles, thereby increasing sales and ROI (return on investment) in the technical communication department.

Speeding Up Compliance with Knowledge of Standards

Typically, technical communicators have extensive knowledge of standards and strict compliance requirements (ISO, Section 508, Sarbanes-Oxley) for specific industries. They also have extensive knowledge about processes, such as Agile and Six Sigma. When introduced early in the project lifecycle, this expertise and compliance saves significant time and avoids missed deadlines.

Example:

The Food and Drug Administration has very specific requirements for companies applying for FDA approval of a new pharmaceutical. If those documentation requirements are not met, then the application can be rejected, requiring re-application — which extends time-to-market by months in an industry with high costs and high potential profits.

Familiarity with processes — such as the Agile software development process — means that technical communication departments are ready when companies adopt these new processes. Technical communication departments won't miss a step when adjusting their systems.

In this case, technical communication departments engage in cost-avoidance by using their knowledge of standards, requirements, processes, and specific industries.

Tools and Technology Expertise

In the technical-communications industry, we know we can cut vendor costs on all sorts of big-ticket items (e.g., translation and printing) by adopting specific tools, technologies, and processes. For example, documentation-specific processes, such as single-sourcing, can significantly slash development time within a single department.

With so many delivery options and tools available, technical communicators play an integral role in revealing optimum solutions by thoroughly analyzing company and customer needs

Using domain expertise to reduce vendor bills and development time within the department is a critical example of how technical communication departments increase the bottom line in a concrete way — every day!

Improving Communication

Technical communicator departments improve internal communications — both personally and electronically. Often, technical communicators are the “glue” between departments, because they interact with so many teams and share project knowledge. Electronically, technical communicators drive and manage Intranets, SharePoint sites, wikis, and other internal knowledge-management initiatives.

Example:

I worked for one software company where the training and support departments needed to add up-to-date upcoming features information and fixes to the queue. So I created an internal wiki providing this content and gave users the option to contribute their own suggestions and questions. After some wiki training and a Hawaiian-shirt-day party to kick off the project, the wiki grew and became an important internal information source. This saved time for several departments, and also provided a way to gather useful feedback.

That is just one example of using technology to improve internal communications. It shows that a technical communication department is not only an information provider, but also a valuable source of knowledge that can save time and money across departments.

Projects succeed or fail based on how well the project team communicates. Good communication increases a company's competitive advantage because of increased innovation and faster time to market. Project success and competitive advantage directly impact the bottom line.

Increasing Customer Satisfaction

Technical communicators improve the customer-support experience by providing reference information that helps support professionals answer questions quickly. In addition to documentation, technical communicators often answer questions in customer forums and write knowledgebase articles and blog entries that enhance customer support.

The relationship between the technical communicator and customer support departments has another benefit; customer support can track questions and pass them on to the technical communication department, so that the documentation set can be improved. At one large company with a wide range of products, I set up a system with customer support – they sent us monthly reports on calls by product, which we used to determine if there were missing pieces in the documentation set. Conversely, if the log revealed that the customer was not referred to existing documentation, we could point out the location for future reference. This type of knowledge sharing within the company speeded customer support, because the two teams learned who the internal experts were in each department. In a large company, this can be often be difficult.

Since customer satisfaction is a company-wide goal that can lead to positive press and future sales, this is a valuable technical communicator role. Happy customers equal a big return on investment from the technical communications department.

Social Media Strategy

This is a new and growing role for technical communication departments that has several facets. In addition to providing content for social-media initiatives (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, wikis, blogs), there is also the issue of enabling customers to “join the conversation,” then integrate that content into the formal documentation set.

Integrating social media with documentation must address various strategic issues. For example:

- Choosing the social networking options
- Deciding what sort of feedback to allow
- Determining how that user-generated feedback should be integrated into the formal documentation set

How customers will be recognized for their contributions also needs to be considered, as well as how to handle negative input. After implementation, these customer communities need to be managed and encouraged.

Clearly, integrating documentation with social media is a new role, but these efforts will ultimately increase the product visibility by increasing Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and enhance the customer experience by creating communities of practice that engage, recognize, and reward users.

Conclusion

All corporate cost centers contribute to the total revenue in some way, but the goal of this article was to point out some of the non-traditional ways that technical communicators can and do add value by increasing the bottom line — while still providing quality content that serves both internal and external customers.

Further Reading

Following is a variety of articles, blog posts, and web sites that discuss this subject from a variety of angles.

[5 Ways to Make Executives Love the Publications Department](#) -- Alan Porter

[Demonstrating the Effectiveness and Value of Technical Communication Products and Services](#) -- Saul Carliner

[The Value of Technical Communication](#) -- Society for Technical Communication (STC) website

[Value Proposition](#) -- STC Body of Knowledge portal

[Proving Worth: What Technical Communication Managers Must Do to Prove the Value of Their Deliverables](#) -- Hannah Kirk

[Seven Habits of Highly Successful Technical Communicators](#) -- Rob Hanna, Bernard Aschwanden, and Rob Frankland:

[Explaining the Value of Technical Communication on the Job Search](#) -- Joanna Castner

[Measuring the value added by technical documentation: a review of research and practice](#) -- Jay Mead

About the Author

Nicky Bleiel is the Lead Information Developer for [Doc-To-Help](#). She has 15 years of experience in technical communication; writing and designing information for software products in the documentation, media, industrial automation, simulation, and pharmaceutical industries. She is a Director-At-Large of the Society for Technical Communication and has presented at STC's annual meeting and at many regional conferences and chapter meetings. She has also presented at WritersUA, tcworld, LavaCon, and DocTrain on many topics, including embedded help, tools and technologies, user assistance design, single sourcing, wikis, Web 2.0, and convergence technical communication. You can reach Nicky at NickyB@doctohelp.com.