

# Thinking Outside the (Tech Docs) Box

Structured Authoring As Competitive Advantage

A JUSTSYSTEMS WHITEPAPER

## From Cost Center to Value Generator

There was a time when technical writing was seen as a cost center—a necessary function, but hardly a key lever for competitive advantage. This is quickly changing as globalization and hyper-competition put customers in control and organizations scramble for new and different ways to strengthen relationships.

Today's customers are the beneficiaries of virtually unlimited choice, with growing expectations for cost, quality and service. Today's product and services companies are realizing that product innovation and cost leadership are no longer worthy advantages, as global competition compresses product lifecycles and makes cost advantages impossible to sustain. Today, the only remaining sustainable advantage comes from the customer relationship itself—specifically, the two-way conversation occurring with customers around the world and around the clock.

This conversation is how relationships are formed and how they're strengthened over time. Each and every day, customers and other stakeholders count on product documentation, marketing materials, policies and procedures, aftermarket service and maintenance manuals and other content to do their jobs and solve their problems. This information is delivered to websites, call center applications and other electronic and print media. This information must be accurate, consistent and accessible. When it's not, the promise that binds the customer relationship is broken, putting loyalty at risk.

Many organizations already know that customer relationships are their most valuable asset. What they may not know is that relationships aren't built on product or cost advantages—they're built on this two-way conversation. Relationships are strengthened and weakened slowly over time through a series of subtle and often mundane interactions. Taken in isolation, these interactions are seemingly low-value. But in aggregate, these interactions represent the customer relationship itself. In this light, how information is created, published and maintained is the very basis for competitive advantage.

Smart companies are recognizing the value and importance of the technical communications process—not as a cost center, but as a value generator and the gateway to the customer relationship. Customers keep score based on the quality of the conversation they're having—the value they're provided and whether their voice is heard.

Key to this conversation is how information is communicated and captured, specifically:

- The speed, quality, accuracy and consistency of how information is published
- The ability to transform publishing from a one-way street into a two-way conversation
- The ability to capture information—knowledge—across the enterprise as it's being created

## Structured Authoring as Competitive Advantage

Increasingly, tech writers are central to this two-way exchange with customers, moving this function from the basement to the corner office. Suddenly, tech writers know customers as well as anyone else—and they're in a unique position to influence the strength and value of the customer relationship. This realization is casting a new light on the role authoring and publishing plays in competitive advantage.

The challenge, of course, is learning to become an organization that values technical communication, not as a cost-center, but as a value generator with game-changing potential. This requires a hard look at the process itself and a commitment to what it takes to transform authoring and publishing from an afterthought to a key lever for competitive advantage.

## Challenge #1: Authoring is Collaborative

Technical writers and their less specialized counterparts have always been two worlds divided, but forever interdependent. Many technical writers are experts in the science of writing, but not the subject matter itself. And for many organizations, documentation is developed in parallel with products, from the very earliest stages of product definition. This creates an inherent interdependency between tech writers and the broader community of business people, subject matter experts, and other contributors. As a result, content authoring becomes a fundamentally collaborative process, involving many different stakeholders with varying skills, perspectives, tool preferences and tolerances for complexity.

Tech writers live in a world of process and precision—a place where content creation is less art than science. For these folks, the structure of information is every bit as important as the content itself. While the rest of us may just sit down and write, tech writers map out a process and think deeply about how content will be reused and maintained before the first sentence is formed. They work in specialized tools that are designed for publishing, turning unstructured prose into valid XML and turning monolithic documents into a federation of loosely joined topics that can be easily reused and maintained.

The challenge is that these are worlds divided—and to a large degree, by tools themselves.

Many organizations try to force specialized tools on every knowledge worker who contributes to the authoring process. Despite the best of tools and the best of intentions, change-averse end users resist. Other organizations install plugins for existing Office and other desktop applications, hoping to “hide” structured authoring capabilities within existing toolsets. In doing so, they often compromise the effectiveness of these applications for both specialized publishing and day-to-day use.

The solution is to allow professional authors and other advanced users to use their specialized authoring tools, and connect to the broader community of contributors by formalizing a collaborative process that combines the ubiquity of the web, the low overhead of a hosted server, with workflow for structured routing and e-mail for alerts. Rather than passing around an XML document, which requires end users to have a tool running on their desktop, host the documents on a centralized server, hide the complexity of the XML, guide them through the process in a wizard-like fashion, and provide a browser-based toolset for editing, approvals, comments and other contributions. Remove the training obstacle, eliminate the local installation of technology—draw end users into the process by taking the burden off the desktop and off of the end-users themselves. Suddenly structured authoring is collaborative, seamless and inclusive.

The good news is that organizations can unite these worlds divided by bridging the gap with a collaborative authoring environment that addresses the needs of professional writers and the diverse group of stakeholders they rely upon. The result is a process that accelerates the creation of new information and produces higher quality content by closely aligning the holders of knowledge and the producers of content. The result is powerful: Value-added, highest-quality content—the foundation to the conversation that underlies the customer relationship.

## Challenge #2: Publishing is a One-Way Street

Conversations require two-way interaction, a give and take that leads to insight and alignment between exchanging parties. The reality is that the rise of social media technologies such as blogs and wikis have given customers a voice and created an appetite—indeed, an expectation—for a two-way exchange.

Customers want to talk and organizations must be prepared to listen.

The problem is that today’s publishing process is not a conversation—it’s a one-way street. As a result, important customer insight—out on the edges where information is consumed and applied—is lost. How, then, does experience make its way back into the publishing process? In most organizations, it doesn’t. As a result, organizations miss the opportunity to gather feedback with top- and bottom-line implications.

For example, understanding customer preferences and gathering their ideas and feedback is invaluable insight that informs the product development process and can lead to new innovations with significant revenue potential. Design flaws detected early by customers can head off major recalls and aftermarket service issues that can put profitability—and sometimes even viability—at risk.

Organizations must incorporate a feedback loop into the publishing process, transforming it into an organic conversation that incorporates the voice and sentiments of customers and other stakeholders. Websites, wikis and documents themselves should allow customers and other information consumers to comment, annotate and make their opinions heard. Capturing community generated content transforms the publishing process into a true conversation that yields insight into the customer and turns isolated content into value-added information that delivers more value and more relevance to customers.

### Challenge #3: Everyone is an Author

The reality is that occasional and “accidental” authors represent more than 95% of the organization, comprising people and roles that produce content prolifically but with little or no structure in place. How then do you capture this knowledge without imposing new tools and process on end-users or dramatically modifying the tools they already use?

Sure, much of the content produced has minimal reuse value—just because it can be reused doesn’t mean it should. But some of this content is tremendously valuable and often critical for reuse, but it remains trapped in documents, databases, wikis and other collaborative environments.

Call centers, sales and after-market service and maintenance personnel, hardware and software engineers and other knowledge workers produce content that provides insight into the market, the customer, the product, the service, the policies and procedures.

How do you capture this information as richly described, highly reusable XML without forcing end-users to trade in their existing tools? The key is to conduct a top-down assessment of existing content-generating processes and transparently weave structured authoring into applications where the most critical content is being produced. You embedded authoring capabilities into the various line-of-business applications, websites, wikis and other content-generating tools and processes and you make it transparent to the end user.

By making it part of the process, you transform structured authoring from a discretionary choice to simply “how things get done.” Make it seamless, transparent and in-line with an existing process and end-users will get on board without resistance.

### From the Basement to the Corner Office

In many organizations, structured authoring has traveled below the radar of the executive suite. But that is quickly changing as organizations realize that authoring and publishing of information is absolutely critical to the strength and value of the customer relationship, which many agree is the last remaining basis for sustainable competitive advantage.

As product innovations and cost advantages slip away to rising global competition, the strength of the customer relationship takes on unequalled importance. With the speed, accuracy and quality of communication so fundamental to the conversation that forms this relationship, structured authoring and publishing has risen considerably on the business-side agenda—moving out of the basement and into the corner office, and securing its place as one of the essential levers for competitive advantage.

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