

CASE STUDY



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Sterling Commerce has provided business process solutions to FORTUNE® 500 companies and the world's largest banks for over 30 years.

Now one of the world's largest providers of business process solutions, Sterling Commerce continues to develop innovative software and services that help organizations optimize the performance of their partners, suppliers and customers.

A pioneer of electronic data interchange (EDI) and secure file transfer technology, Sterling Commerce continues to provide reliable, secure business communications to business communities in the retail, consumer packaged goods, manufacturing, financial services, healthcare and telecommunications industries.

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Bob Zebian, Information Architect
Sterling Commerce

Single-sourced Content Management with XMetaL® Creates Customer Delight for Sterling Commerce

One of the Industry's Most Successful Business Integrators Breaks Down its own Internal Barriers to Save Money and Time with More Tailored Content

For more than 30 years, Sterling Commerce has smoothed the interactions, processes and business integration between companies and their customers, partners and suppliers – for four out of five of the FORTUNE® 500.

Part of the success Sterling Commerce has enjoyed is thanks to its steadfast concentration on being the engine of big business: the technology foundation of the business-to-business (B2B) supply chain. Behind-the-scenes, Sterling Commerce makes commerce happen – and is a near-given for any financial institution or large retailer.

Part of the mission for Sterling Commerce is to “simplify the most complex business processes to help customers achieve business without borders.” But not long ago, faced with escalating content demands and a new strategic directive towards selling solutions instead of products, Sterling Commerce discovered that it had its own internal process barriers to overcome.

New Solution-Selling Model Inspires a New Approach to Content

Like so many organizations in today's customer-focused economy, the executives at Sterling Commerce decided to expand product-centric selling in favor of tailored solutions to address specific vertical or customer needs. Product-based manuals, updated with each version release are a familiar 'beast'. But how does a documentation team support true solution-based positioning of its offerings? It was a challenge that landed within the mandate of the Sterling Commerce Information Development Department.

“If we were going to take a tailored approach to offering unique solutions, we'd need tailored support content to back it up,” Bob Zebian, information architect, Product Documentation for Sterling Commerce recalls. “That's what brought us to XML – we needed to be able to mix and match pieces of support guidance to accompany uniquely combined pieces of technology.”

“Under the old model with traditional, unstructured documents, customer-tailored content was more than difficult to produce,” Zebian noted – “it would have been near-impossible.”

“It was hard enough to keep up with requirements when our documentation was product-based,” he said. “But if we'd been asked to create unique manuals for every customer, it wouldn't have even been a question of us being drawn-out, or bottlenecked – we simply would not be able to deliver it quickly without a topic-based platform to pull from.”

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XMetaL helps solution-minded organizations adapt products and service content to suit customer needs by bringing topic-based structure to high volumes of valuable content.

Using industry standards including Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA), XMetaL enables content creators to efficiently create, collaborate, and reuse information for a personalized set of documentation ensuring customer proficiency and satisfaction.

“...We knew that documentation would be at the forefront of ensuring customer satisfaction.

If it helps our customers to become proficient more quickly or if it helps them troubleshoot their way out of a frustrating problem—then we’ve not only reduced the number of support calls, but we’ve made our customers happier.”

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Content’s Link to Customer Satisfaction

The company’s solution-focused mandate was designed to significantly improve customer satisfaction – or as the internal mantra states it: to create ‘customer delight.’ This meant uncovering unmet needs with a highly personalized approach across every touchpoint – beyond sales through to long-term service.

“As soon as this new mandate was handed to us, we knew that documentation would be at the forefront of ensuring customer satisfaction,” Zebian added. “If it’s thorough – that is, if it helps our customers to become proficient more quickly, or if it helps them troubleshoot their way out of a frustrating problem – then we’ve not only reduced the number of support calls, but we’ve made our customers happier.”

What made the satisfaction link so apparent to Zebian and the Information Development Department was context. He explains:

“When a customer reaches for a manual, they’re usually frustrated because the something isn’t working the way they expect it to. That’s true for just about any company that implements new products – moments where documentation comes into play make-or-break customer relationships.

“Topic-based writing,” said Zebian, “is the ideal platform for truly helpful content that’s crafted from the customer perspective. Unlike writing for a book or manual, the nature of topic-based writing is to address specific issues – so that it can be duplicated in other documents or outputs without relying on the context of a book.

“Customers say, ‘I’ve got this problem, or this question, and I need the answer so that I can get unstuck,’” he said. “The more we can modularize our topics, the more we’ll be a positive intervening force... and the happier our customers will be.”

XMetaL® Facilitates Customer-Tailored Content

With many documentation teams at Sterling Commerce dispersed worldwide, they collectively own more than 45,000 pages of documentation – either as portable document format (PDF) books or various formats of help systems. With the company in acquisition mode, the absorption of new teams and content libraries keep the documentation mandate in a state of constant growth.

“We have such a huge stable of content,” says Zebian. “But in this new selling environment, less is more. XML helps us to minimize the volume of content we give to each customer – we want to give them precisely what they need to be productive, and no more.”

Sterling Commerce chose to transition their content creation process from the traditional unstructured world to the topic-based, DITA-supported XML platform delivered by XMetaL. For Zebian, the selection of JustSystems’ XMetaL was not made only on the merits of technology—but on that of JustSystems as a partner who would help Sterling Commerce to succeed in this new content era.

“The people at JustSystems really know DITA – that was apparent right away,” he says. “With that, we like the one-two punch of their editing platform that integrates with content management systems (CMS), plus their expertise with DITA to help us be successful.”

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But the change in document-based writing to topic-based writing is oftentimes followed by uneasiness for staff. However, with Zebian's team, they embraced the opportunity to take a step up in their careers to work with XML and DITA – not to mention advancing their abilities as information architects and not just writers. What also energized them was spending less time on formatting, and more time creating valuable content for customers. What used to take up 40 percent of their time on layout and formatting – would be reduced to zero, thanks to the publishing capabilities built into XMetaL and DITA.

Finally, the flexible customization capabilities of XMetaL gives the team at Sterling Commerce the freedom to tweak the system as they become power users of topic-based authoring – and as their solution selling mandate becomes even more tailored and ambitious over time.

Tailored Content = Brand Confidence

By intervening positively to turn around potentially frustrating moments for customers, the documentation at Sterling Commerce doesn't simply diffuse problems, it increases 'customer delight.' As Zebian notes, this is all part of the sales, marketing and service strategy at Sterling Commerce: to make each customer feel that their relationship with the 'business without borders' expert is unique, and valued as such.

"Even though documentation may seem like an internal function of a company, at Sterling Commerce, this new approach is a key component of our customer strategy and brand," he said. "We're selling so much more than technology. We sell a partnership. And when we're there for our customers consistently – when we step in at the right moments to provide just the information they need – everyone wins."

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About JustSystems

JustSystems is a leading global software provider with three decades of successful innovation in office productivity, information management, and consumer and enterprise software. With over 2,500 customers worldwide, the company is continuing a global expansion strategy based on its xfy enterprise software, XMetaL content lifecycle solutions, and its pioneering work in enabling XBRL financial reporting technologies. JustSystems is one of the 2008 KMWorld 100 Companies that Matter in Knowledge Management, a 2008 EContent 100 member, and was recognized on the 2008 KMWorld Trend-Setting Product list for XMetaL. Major strategic partnerships include IBM, Oracle and EMC.

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