Delivering Customer Information: Structured Authoring Solves Your Business Problems

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Contents

Executive Summary

Your customers and potential customers require a lot of information about your products and services: sales brochures, marketing briefs, user guides, and so forth. When you use a traditional, document-centered publication strategy to deliver all of this content, you face challenges in complying with regulations, protecting the integrity of your brand, and meeting the expectations of a diverse customer set.

The key to overcoming these challenges is *structured authoring*.

Your Challenges

As your company has grown and your product line has diversified, you have developed written information – for example, user instructions, spec sheets, and sales brochures. The volume of information has grown, and as a result you face several challenges.

The cost of regulatory compliance. The information must meet standards that have been established by the Food and Drug Administration (in the U.S.) and other regulatory agencies in the various countries in which you do business. Because the standards are often complex and changeable, it's hard to develop new information that meets regulatory approval and hard to keep your existing information in compliance.

The cost of developing brand-specific content. When you develop and maintain information across product lines and across regions, and as your company grows through mergers and acquisitions, information is drawn from many different sources with many different writing styles and many different looks. The result: a danger of customer confusion and lack of a strong, consistent brand image.

The difficulty of publishing information. Your customers are looking for your information in a variety of situations, in a variety of formats. In addition to traditional media, like print, they want to display your information on devices like smartphones and tablets. How can you afford to develop and publish information in all of these formats?

You can meet each of these challenges by moving the information to a structured format. SDI Global Solutions specializes helping its clients make the move in the most cost-effective way possible, positioning you for success in the modern, worldwide marketplace.

Regulatory Issues

In a regulated industry, it can be challenging and expensive to produce information for customers. Writers need to navigate a complicated landscape, deciding which regulations apply to the content they're creating while staying up to date with a complex set of rules and requirements that keeps on changing.

Almost inevitably, you end up with a mixture of information – some that meets all of the regulatory requirements, some that falls short in certain areas, and some that used to meet all of the requirements but has since fallen out of date.

The Cost of Regulations

Two major factors add to the challenge, and the cost, of operating in a regulated industry.

Content that doesn't conform to the regulations. Many writers in Marketing, Technical Publications, and other areas of your company might not have a thorough understanding of the regulatory requirements for customer information. As a result, much of what they write has to be edited before it's submitted to the regulatory agencies. Even after editing, it might be incomplete or poorly organized. All of this adds to your staffing costs, tends to prolong the regulatory process, and often necessitates additional rework after the regulatory review.

The sheer volume of information. Before submitting your information to the regulatory agencies, it costs a lot to assemble all of the relevant content and check it for compliance. After submitting, again, the time needed to evaluate your submission is protracted. Then, after the submission is returned, there's likely to be significant rework to bring the content into compliance.

Wouldn't it be nice if all of your content, from the start, was written to comply with regulatory requirements? Wouldn't it be nice if the content were stored in a central location?

Structured Authoring Reduces Your Costs

Put simply, rejection – and rework – cost money.

Structured authoring can guide your writers so that they organize content in a fashion that adheres to the regulatory guidelines. The writers don't need an encyclopedic knowledge of the regulations; instead, the structure of the information helps ensure that the writers produce content that is in compliance.

Reuse

With structured authoring, you break large blocks of information, like chapters and books, into smaller pieces. Each piece can then be used in more than one context. Rather than dealing with a wall – or a single large document – you deal with individual bricks that are assembled in multiple ways into multiple documents. This technique, called *reuse*, reduces the overall volume of information. Your content is easier to track, easier to maintain, and easier to gather together when it's time to submit the content to regulatory agencies.

Reuse is also an excellent way to ensure that all mentions of specific features or specifications in your customer information are handled correctly, consistently, and in keeping with the relevant regulations.
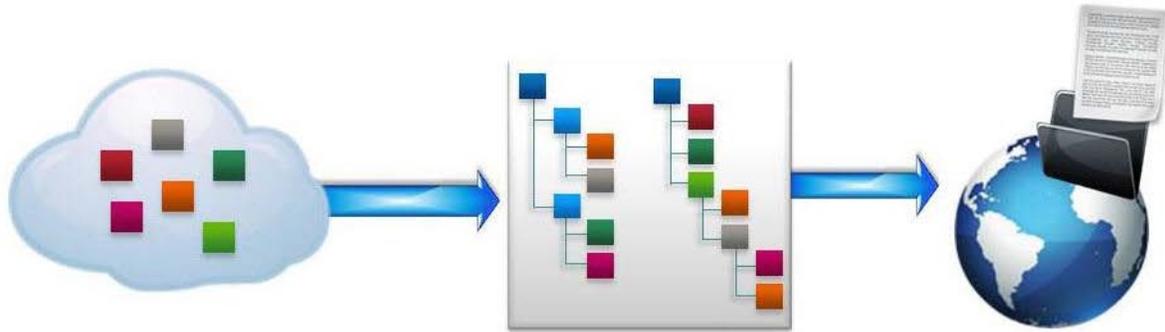
Figure 1. In structured authoring, topics are stored in a central repository and assembled into different documents – which can be published in different formats.

Central Storage and Management

When information is structured you can store it in a central repository, known as a content management system, where the information can be used across many different information sets and where you can classify it according to customer groups, product lines, regions, and other criteria that reflect the particular needs of your business.

The submission process can be significantly shorter because:

- There's less content to review.
- Pertinent information is easier to find because the content is better organized.
- The content is more consistent in terms of the terminology it uses and in terms of the way in which warnings and hazard statements are documented.

Faster to Market, Lower Costs

The shorter submission process means that your product gets to market faster. It also means lower costs for you, simply because less time is devoted to tracking the process and because less rework is needed afterward.

Rejection costs money, but acceptance saves money -- and gets you to market faster. Structuring your information and following industry-standard best practices for developing, managing, and building your content will increase your odds for acceptance.

Branding Issues

Your company has built an extensive line of product offerings that are sold all over the world. The products are sold under multiple brand names, often as a result of mergers and acquisitions. Each brand has its own color schemes, logos, and other identifying marks.

Sometimes the same product is sold under more than one brand name – as is the case, for example, in the cellphone industry, where a single device is often sold by different carriers under different model names.

The Cost of Branding

Several factors increase the cost of producing information in a complex environment like this.

Costs of developing brand-specific content. Often, content that's identical – or nearly identical – has to fit multiple brand images and be published for multiple countries. There are costs for formatting and localizing each separate version of the content – as well as for revising each version when products are updated.

Lack of consistency. When content for the same product or service is developed in different regional offices, each version of the content varies widely in terms of terminology, organization, and sometimes even brand image. The result: customer confusion and the lack of a strong, consistent brand image.

Structured Authoring Strengthens Your Brand

Structured authoring can reduce your costs through the use of information that is developed and managed centrally. It can boost your brand by delivering consistent content and messages to your customers.

Information is modular, developed in chunks that can be slotted easily into structures that accommodate the way your customers look for information. Various "look and feel" designs are easily applied to the chunks so that they reflect the different brands under which a product is marketed. For example, a single set of instructions can be published in print format for one product model and on a website for another product model – each version reflecting the desired brand image.
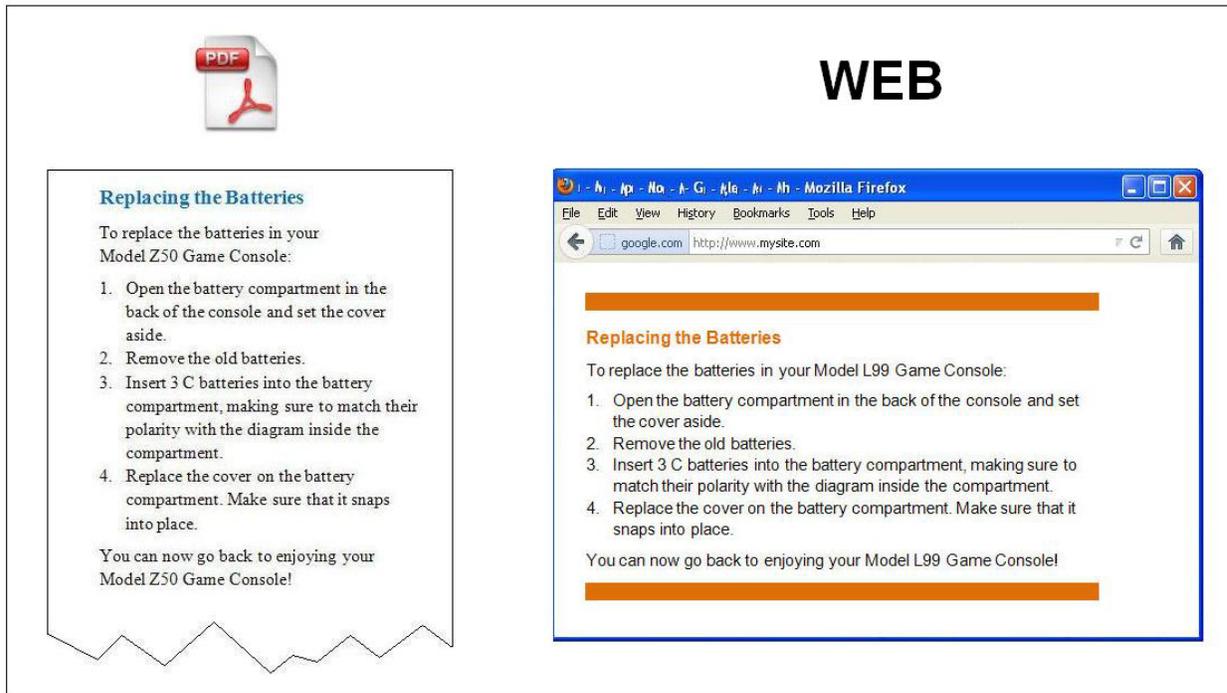
Figure 2. In this example, one chunk of information is reused for two different brands (note the model numbers), reflecting different brand images, in different formats.

Because information is developed in one place (or in different places, but using a single set of templates), it's consistent across the board in terms of terminology, organization, and overall approach.

When it's time to release the information to customers, each chunk is ready to be formatted, localized, and then published for the desired product, brand, and region. The information costs less to develop, and the results are consistent with each other. Later, when revisions are needed, the revisions are made once – in the information chunks, not in the published content. Again, this reduces costs and preserves consistency.

Publishing Issues

Your customers have always wanted to get information about your products when they needed it, in the formats that worked best for them. Recently, however, it's been harder for you to meet that expectation.

The Cost of Publishing

Your customers look for your information in all of the traditional formats, like printed books and HTML-based web pages – and they also look for it on devices like smartphones and tablets. With the exploding variety of devices and formats, your customers expect more from you. But it

costs a lot to develop the information, make it ready to publish, and then publish it in all of the formats your customers expect.

How do you keep up? How do you continue providing information in an ever increasing number of formats?

Structured Authoring Meets Customer Expectations

Structured authoring enables a flexible, "on demand" publishing methodology.

In structured authoring, your writers create content that isn't locked into a specific format. As a result, any given piece of information can be displayed with equal ease in all formats – from PDF files and web pages to smartphone displays to the devices that haven't even been invented.

As your writers create information they can give it attributes (called metadata) that, when used by search engines, make the information easy to find and relevant to your customers' needs.

Because the information is created without being locked into a single format, you can apply whatever branding – colors, formats, logos, and so forth – makes sense in each situation in which the information is consumed.

Your customers find the information they need, when and where they need it. Your brand image is strengthened: you're seen as a company that's customer-friendly and easy to do business with.

Additional Benefits

Structured authoring represents a vital first step toward an Enterprise Information Management strategy – a long-range program that provides you with new methods for locating, extracting, and using information across a broad array of information sources.

The Enterprise Information Management strategy tames the information overload you're experiencing and turns it into a business asset. The strategy provides the basis to collect and integrate information from throughout your organization to help you and your employees gain new business value and insights. You get faster answers to your questions and you gain a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the issues facing you.

SDI offers a broad set of services, tools, and technologies that can contribute to cost reduction and regulatory compliance and set the stage for a new era in information management, productivity, and delivery of business intelligence in your enterprise.

Summary

Structured authoring offers cost-effective ways to develop and publish information that readily meets regulatory requirements, strengthens the corporate brand, and reaches your customers in multiple formats.

SDI Global Solutions will work with you to build a bridge to the future: delivering a set of tools and processes tailored to your specific business needs, and recognizing that you need to evolve your current processes and procedures while preserving as much of your existing content as possible.

Tap into SDI's expertise and experience as you transform your business from a document-centered publication strategy to a new strategy that increases efficiency, improves customer satisfaction, and strengthens your brand.

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