

# Thinking Outside the (Tech Docs) Box

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Structured Authoring as a Competitive Edge

A JUSTSYSTEMS WHITEPAPER

## From Cost Center to Strategic Asset

Business responds to the market and the global market changes twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without pause. Communication must be available for customers anywhere, any time. Companies are engaged in a non-stop relationship building process with customers and potential customers. The rapid pace of this conversation does not allow for a hiccup, a misrepresentation, a mistake.

For so long, silos within companies handled the relationship differently at different moments in the conversation. Where marketing is echoed by sales and then by the product materials, the potential blossoms for a strong relationship. The company's message is clear and consistent throughout the introduction.

But a conversation is a two-way street. Companies struggle to get meaningful feedback from potential customers and customers. Why did you navigate away from our site? You downloaded a whitepaper but never came back. Not all companies can manage these metrics let alone analyze what they mean.

Many businesses follow the traditional model where one silo, marketing, works out a message for customers and advertises that message with web sites, info sheets, and white papers. Sales gets triggered with a follow-up when a customer is interested, but does their story dovetail with what marketing has said? And, in general, companies rely on development communicating with tech docs and tech docs delivering information to the users. In some cases, there are legal or regulatory contributions to the tech docs. But, do these documents benefit from the work of marketing and sales?

To facilitate this needed conversation, businesses add contact points, real and virtual, to give the customer the sense that the business is listening to their concerns and needs.

The challenge, then, is to blend these voices and the technology for developing a conversation and building a relationship.

## Tech Docs as a Strategic Advantage

Before they choose a product, customers look at your current relationships and the potential for forming a quality relationship with your company. What do you have on tap for the potential customer to read about your products? Do you support your papers and manuals with chatbots, videos, and tutorials? Customers will judge how engaged you are by how broad and deep your available communications.

Smart companies recognize the value and the importance of the tech docs process: the tech docs team is no longer a simple cost center but a value generator, a gateway in the relationship-building conversation companies have with customers.

Does your company have a content strategy that builds quality relationships, wins customers, and strengthens the quality of your product?

How do you support this deepening relationship? You improve your conversation. Key to this conversation is how information is captured and communicated, specifically:

- The speed, quality, accuracy, and consistency of your published information.
- The ability to transform publishing from a short, one-way street into a highway going many places.
- The ability to capture and integrate the customer's experience and questions into future iterations of the conversation's outlets.
- The ability to integrate knowledge from across the enterprise as it is being created.

### Structured Authoring Provides the Key

Structured authoring represents a new opportunity to crack open the tech docs process and increase sharing between various types of input and output, easily, efficiently, and inexpensively.

Structured writing takes content beyond the visual cues of formatting. Structured writing adds semantic meaning to the content through rules that organize and constrain the structure of the content. Structured authoring takes advantage of technology to add context and depth to documents.

Tools for structured authoring range in capability from a technical focus to a broader user audience. What structured authoring allows a company to do is increase the participation in content creation and broaden the potential use of the content both within the organization and as part of the conversation with the customer.

### Collaborating on a Common Message

It's important that your users get the same information, the same quality of content, regardless of which part of your company they are engaged with. Your marketing materials and sales presentations share content, or at least share the underlying content, such as feature names and descriptions. The content could come from the same repository and be rephrased to meet the needs of the stage of the conversation. That same repository can feed your website, your chatbot, and your documentation manuals for your product. The contents of your wiki can be revised and written to conform to the message you want to deliver to the customer.

Structured content stored properly supports this multifaceted conversation. By breaking down the wall between the content experts in the tech docs team and the

rest of the company, you invest in consolidating that common message, reinforcing your brand, and developing a conversation with your customer.

Tech docs teams are content experts. They rely on the contributions of other parts of the company, and that relationship generally focuses on the product development team. By leveraging the availability of tools beyond the highly specialized tools used by doc teams to produce manuals, other teams can join in the process and contribute to and benefit from the science of content management. For technical writers the structure of content and process of developing content are as important as the content itself. When working with XML and structured documentation, the writers work not just with the monolithic output but the smaller fragments of content that may be reusable, repeatable, and distributed across documents and output types.

Rather than trying to teach everyone how to be a technical writer, the company can leverage processes and technology that allows members of the business to become collaborators and contributors to the web of content that is massaged and redistributed through the tech docs team.

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 through a formalized collaborative process that combines the ubiquity of the web, the low overhead of a hosted server, with workflows for structured routing and email alerts. The complexity of the XML source is completely hidden, where necessary, and contributors are guided through the process in a wizard-style fashion. With browser-based tools for reviewing, commenting, and contributing, the task of collaborating becomes effortless and beneficial to the business and the conversation different departments have with customers.

It starts with sharing a consistent message with the customers, showing them that the company and product, no matter how long on the stage, has a maturity that allows for a full, confidence-producing conversation to develop.

### **Directionality and Communication**

Now that you have a consistent, integrated message coming from your company about your product, you need to hear back from those prospective customers and customers. Conversations are a two-way interaction, but how do you get the insights from your customers so that you can align your product and message with the customer wants and needs?

Blogs, wikis, and chatbots give customers a doorway into contributing to the company's knowledge about how customers perceive, receive, and use the product. Blog and wiki comments can reveal new uses and work-arounds that customers have found; these tell you where your product needs some attention.

The attention may affect your functionality, UI, or manuals. Ideas on new uses can become marketing and sales material. Chatbots can grow giving users a place to ask questions and, if necessary, have their issue escalated to a call center where a live person can handle the conversation with more depth. That information is then added to the circulation within the company where changes to the manuals or the product may take place.

Gathering the ideas and feedback of customers is invaluable and informs the product development process. The process of offering customers alternatives for finding information about the product is the first step in the process. Allowing them to respond is the second step. You must, finally, include a process for reviewing and integrating the customer comments and contributions into the product development process.

### A Company of Contributors

Structured authoring provides the tools and methods to make contributors of a majority of the occasional and accidental authors. These people represent a huge percentage of the company, from developers and quality assurance, to legal and regulatory; it includes sales, marketing, training, and customer support. People who are creating product, answering need, and responding to issues. Instead of operating in silos, maintaining their own sources of information, sharing becomes the modus operandi of the company.

Although much of the content created in the company may have limited value for reuse, it is a valuable resource and should be treated as such. It is part of your business product. Call centers, sales, after-market support, maintenance personnel, development engineers, and knowledge workers throughout the company produce content that provides insight into the market, the customer, the product, the service, and the policies and procedures.

There are tools, methods, and processes available that enable you to capture this information without having to retrain your entire staff on the strange and complicated world of technical communication. The key to successfully implementing a strategy that incorporates the input from such diverse sources is to conduct a top-down assessment of the current content generation process. From there, you can weave in structured authoring where the critical content is generated.

By making it part of the process, you transform structured authoring from a discrete and discretionary choice into the way work is done. Making it seamless, transparent, and productive, in-line with current processes, and contributors get on board for a win-win solution.

## Rising in Importance

Branding goes beyond your marketing materials. Your customer relationship is built on the consistency and quality of the communication of your brand. By offering multiple opportunities for customers to hear and see the same story, from introduction through purchase and use of your product, you win. The faster and more eloquent the dance you achieve within your company, sharing content in a structured and branded fashion, you achieve market share more quickly with greater stability.

The tech docs group is central to this process. As the traditional keepers of the content, they have the tools and methods for improving internal and external communication of the promise that your product represents. By leveraging the in-house expertise of each department and extending your conversational ability, you build a stronger communication structure for users to contribute back to the future development directions you choose.

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