RANDOM THOUGHTS
Communications With A Purpose

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Books are Dead, But Literacy Remains

Young people today generally don't read for pleasure. They read what they must and may prefer to do that on screen. So eventually books will be replaced by electronic forms. But what about now? Now is the time for that to happen with most hardware and software documentation.

This isn't a complaint about the lack of literacy, although much of today's usage is on the wrong side of the literacy coin. Assuming there is such a coin. That's another topic for another time, though.

What's wrong with books? I like books. They're highly portable. They offer immediate random access, particularly when used with "bookmarks" and "indexes". I can add my own information by using a "pen" or a "pencil". Pretty handy, those books. But if the book describes how to use a machine or some software, it's not the book I want; it's the information. And it's the book that causes the price of the information to be so high.

Recently I needed to buy a book to learn how to use a complicated online application. I could have spent $50 and waited a week or two for the book to arrive, but I decided to spend $25 and have the electronic version in one day.

The Cost of Books

To help understand costs, I've created a mythical application called Grunge Puppy 4.5. It's a complex application that requires a 500-page manual with 50 10-page chapters, each written by a different subject matter expert.

In creating a product, there are two main classifications of costs: fixed and incremental. Fixed costs are incurred whether you create 1 copy of the product or 1,000,000. They don't change. Incremental costs represent the additional cost of creating each new unit. With books, the incremental cost is what drives the price up. I can make a case for converting all documentation to electronic forms even if much of me would prefer the book.

Fixed Costs: I'll assume the 50 writers will each be paid $1000 for their 10-page contributions, that a team of 3 editors will each bill 100 hours (at $35/hour), that 2 artists (also at $35/hour) will bill 30 hours each for illustrations, and that 2 page-makeup specialists (aka "typesetters") will each bill 8 hours (at $35/hour) to flow the text into a typesetting application and make it ready for the press.

These are the costs that will be borne whether the press prints 1 copy of the book or 1,000,000. The total fixed costs for this mythical book are $63,160. On a press run of 50,000 copies, this would be $1.26 per book. That's the cost of preparing the information for publication.

Yes, many presses really are this cheap when dealing with the people who create books. But you can double or triple the wages and still come in under $4 per book for fixed costs. The press will also have some additional fixed costs for buildings, offices, and utilities; I have not included these costs.

Incremental Costs: Now we need a mythical press run. We'll print 50,000 copies of the book and every single copy will sell. We're working with a printer who will create the books for $25 each and I'll figure distribution costs at $5 per book. The press will assume a 40% mark-up, which is standard. The incremental cost per book is $35, so paper, printing, and distribution cost nearly 28 times what the preparation of information cost.

Ouch! No wonder our printed book must sell for $50.

The Electronic Model

If we distribute the book electronically, we start with a cost per book of $1.26 assuming the same 50,000 copies sell. There will be some additional costs: A website with high security and a file that can be easily used but may have some copy protections built in. Let's be generous and say that this might cost $5 per copy sold.

The cost of the electronic book could be dropped to $20 ($30 less than the paper version) and the publisher would earn only slightly less profit per book.

But what if by reducing the price to $14 per book, the publisher would be able to sell 100,000 copies instead of 50,000 copies at $50 per book? The profit per book would be substantially less, but the overall net from the book would more than 21% greater based on higher volume.

The electronic model also reduces paper use and the cost of transportation, so everybody wins. But the change will be difficult and many will fight it. I know people who print Web pages to read them. I also know people who refuse to use automatic teller machines at banks. These people are part of a shrinking group. Each new generation accepts advanced technology as the way things are done.

Books are dead. Long live the information! ß

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AT&T DSL: Easier Said than Done

Until March of 2008 I had never installed DSL service. I've had high-speed Internet service at the office and cable service at home, but when a friend needed to replace his slow dial-up service with something faster, I recommended AT&T's DSL because the basic service cost no more than his dial-up service ($20/month) and would be at least 10 times faster. After 3 hours over the course of 2 days, it still wasn't installed and I was beginning to think that the horror stories I've heard about DSL were true.

When we ordered the DSL service, nothing mentioned filters. I knew about them, but my understanding was that they would be included. More or less, they were. The installation kit came with a "data" (network) cable, a DSL cable, a power supply, the DSL modem, and 4 filters: 1 for use at the computer connection and 3 for non-wall-mount phones. Unfortunately, my friend has a wall-mount phone (doesn't everybody?) and we needed the piece that AT&T promised to include but didn't.

The instructions said to install the filters first, so we installed the ones we had. The kitchen wall phone would have no filter until the "complimentary" filter AT&T promised to send arrived. The instructions that came with the kit said the missing wall filter should have been included and several other minor errors could easily confuse someone without any background in network installation: Connectors were misnamed and the colors of cables were misstated. The instructions said that the filters should be installed first, but didn't mention that this was crucial to proper installation.

Testing ... Testing ... Hello?

When it was time to test the system, the installation program reported that it wasn't able to get a connection. I tried several troubleshooting steps described in the instructions and then called the toll-free number for assistance. It was Sunday and the person who answered my call clearly spoke English as a distant second language and didn't really understand DSL. After an hour, she told me that line tests had identified a problem with the lines, but it took another 15 minutes for her to provide information that the line maintenance folks would call to arrange for on-site tests.

A few minutes later the lines maintenance division called to say there was no problem with the lines. I decided to wait for a weekday to pursue it.

The following Tuesday, I stopped by to confirm that all of the connections were as specified in AT&T's instructions (except for where the instructions didn't exactly mesh with the physical world.) The line maintenance division had provided another number to call, one where the people spoke both English and Geek. Within 10 minutes, the technician said he suspected a line problem and wanted to run another line test. I asked about the missing filters. "Oh," he said, "that will keep you from getting connected, but we can still run the line test. That will take about 45 minutes."

About 45 minutes later, the phone rang and a recorded announcement said that there was a line problem. AT&T would arrange to have a technician examine the outside lines and, if the problem wasn't there, they would make an appointment to look at the inside wiring.

Two days and $100 later, AT&T found and fixed the problem with lines inside the house. The problem was caused by mistakes an earlier AT&T technician had made, but it gave the company the opportunity to charge my friend for another house call. Clever marketing, that.

But Wait—There's More!

I still needed to setup Outlook to work with the new system. I expected to spend no more than 30 minutes, but the process took another 3 hours.

Normally these setups are trivial: Outlook needed to send mail through AT&T's server on port 25. Some Internet service providers block port 25 and it's necessary to switch to port 465. Authentication is often required even though the user is already logged on via DSL.

After digging several layers deep in AT&T's online help pages, I found that the version of Outlook my friend was using needed an update to work with secure sockets layer (SSL) settings. I installed it, but still couldn't send mail.

So I called AT&T. The automated attendant gave me a URL to a page on the AT&T webiste where I found that my friend's e-mail address had to be validated. Could that information not be made part of the instructions?

The illustrations AT&T provided for their own website were inaccurate, but the instructions were at least close enough that I was able to setup the account properly. On the second try.

Was This Exercise Worth the Effort?

Yes. Earthlink's speed had dropped to about 20Kbps, which I consider unacceptable even for modems. The DSL speed (using AT&T's lowest-cost option) tops 600Kbps. That's nothing when compared to cable modem speeds of 3000Kbps and above. But those speeds are nothing when compared to countries where users enjoy 30,000Kbps Internet connections.

Compared to 20Kbps, 600Kbps is impressive. An update that could take hours (or days!) at modem speed are completed within 15 to 20 minutes on DSL. In countries that aren't constantly at war or planning for war and where money is spent on infrastructure, these downloads would take 1 minute or less, but we'll take what we can get. ß

CORNER **on the market** by A.J. Stinnett

"Superior managers maintain good teamwork within the work group and with other work groups, and ensure that employees understand the importance of working together."