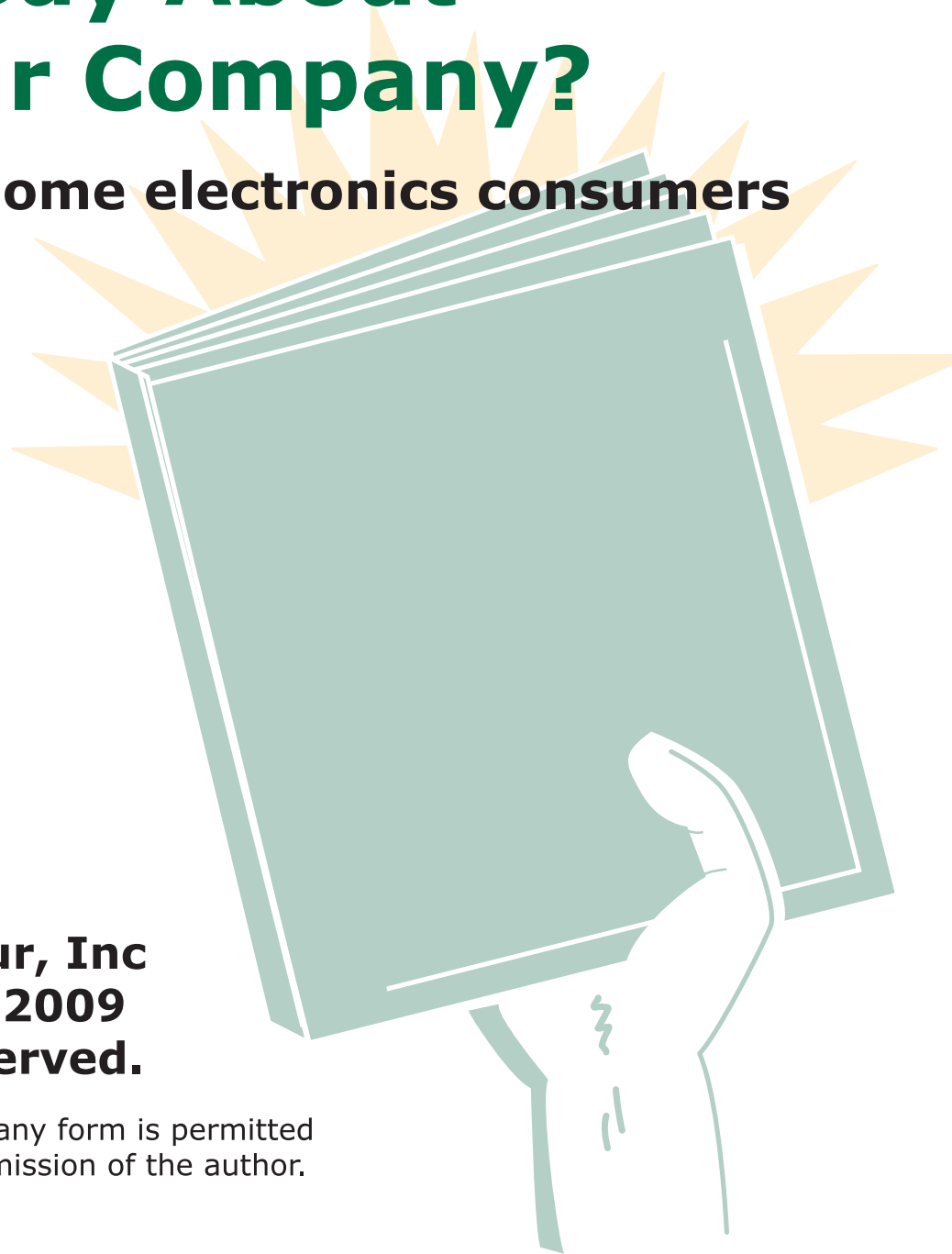


# What Do Your Manuals Say About Your Company?

**A survey of home electronics consumers**

**Manual Labour, Inc  
Copyright © 2009  
All rights reserved.**

No duplication of this material in any form is permitted without the express, written permission of the author.



# What Do Your Manuals Say About Your Company?

## **Executive Summary:**

*According to the Consumer Electronics Association, product returns represent a \$10 billion-dollar-a-year problem for the consumer electronics industry. Technical support costs are spiraling (even with the migration to off-shore providers) while consumer satisfaction with this support is plummeting. New technology and expanded offerings to a stabilized market are increasing competition. What can manufacturers do to help combat these problems? Better consumer manuals are a start.*

## **Do People Read Manuals?**

“[The manual] makes me fearful that the product is cheap.”

“I feel I wasted money on features I can't use.”

“Is it a problem or operator error, how do I know?”

“[A bad manual makes me feel like manufacturers] don't know quite what is going on.”<sup>1</sup>

In a recent series of surveys, Manual Labour Inc, a technical documentation developer, uncovered a problem in the consumer electronics industry: **consumers hate the manuals they receive with products they buy.** And they translate that frustration into purchasing decisions, costing manufacturers sales and driving up returns.

The industry has long insisted that consumers simply don't read the manuals. However, research shows that's true for only a small percentage. From a survey of American users of all technology products (not just consumer electronics)<sup>2</sup>:

- 12% don't read the manual at all
- 12% read it cover to cover before doing anything
- 76 % (the majority) read it only if something goes wrong (or seems to) or before trying a new feature

So, contrary to conventional wisdom, typically 88% of consumers read at least some of the manual.

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotes taken directly from a survey administered to random site visitors during Fall Quarter, 2002.

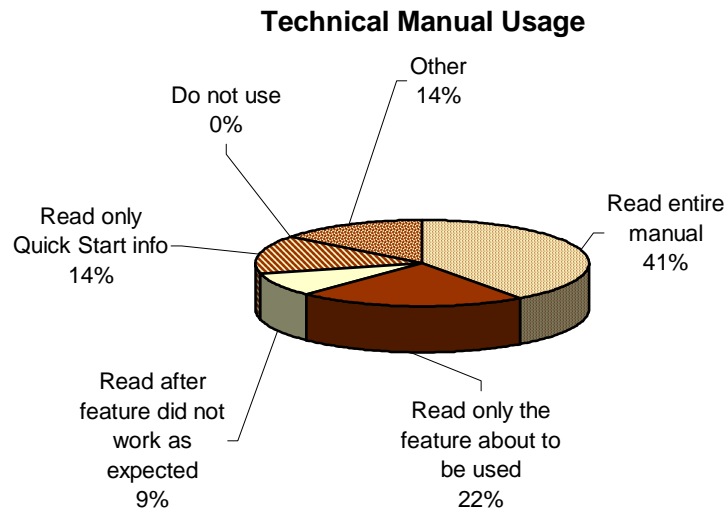
<sup>2</sup> Dynamics in Document Design, Karen Schriver, John Wiley & Sons, 1996

## How Do People Read Manuals?

The difference between perception and reality may lie in how consumers actually read and use manuals, as opposed to how manufacturers and developers think they should.

Because product engineers (the ones usually responsible for writing product manuals) generally either don't read the manual at all, or read it cover-to-cover, they assume everyone else reads (or doesn't read) manuals the same way.

In fact, a recent Manual Labour survey of consumer electronics product consumers shows the following breakdown:



Note that *no one* reported never using the manual at all. <sup>3</sup>

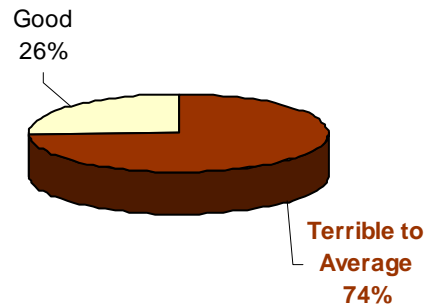
The majority (59%) reported that they do not read the manual completely—yet often **developers assume consumers will read the manual cover to cover**. Chances are good that the information consumers need is hidden somewhere besides where they look. And, given the state of most manual's indexes, consumers will never know about other locations.

---

<sup>3</sup> The “other” category includes answers like “some combination of these choices”.

Thus the industry ends up with the following rating on the manuals it provides:

### Overall Opinion of Current Manuals

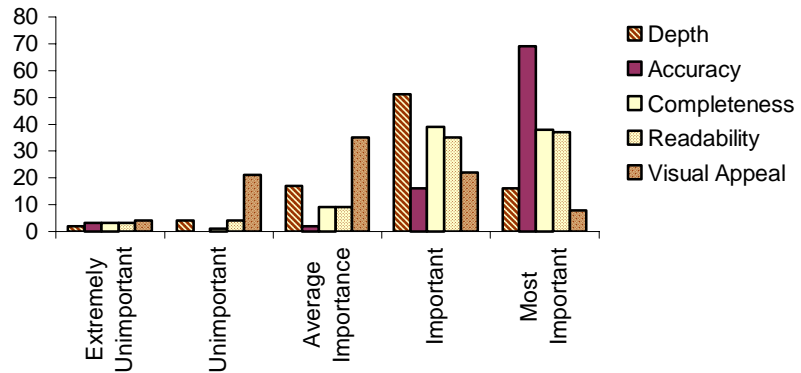


So what can be done differently? Part of the answer lies in understanding what consumers like and dislike about the manuals they currently receive.

### What Do Consumers Want?

The survey next asked respondents to rate the relative importance of various manual features:

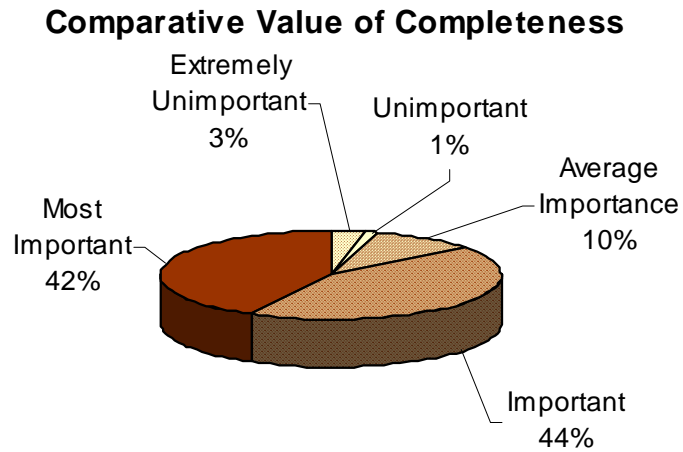
### Importance of Certain Features



Unsurprisingly, accuracy was by far the most important thing to consumers.

## Completeness

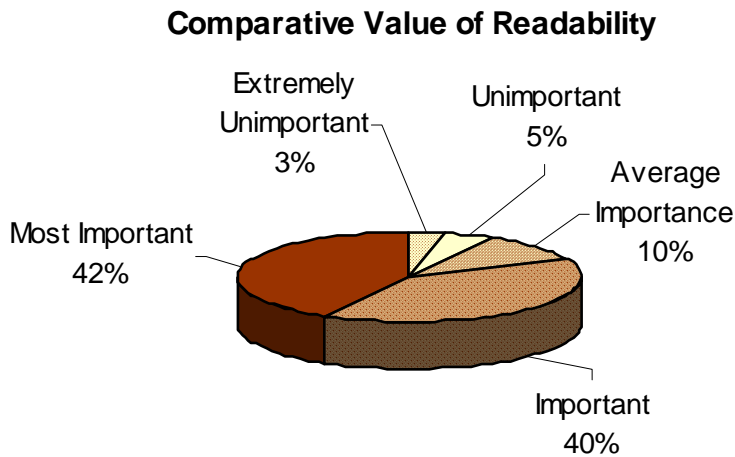
Consumers rated completeness (defined as having every feature covered in the manual) as the next most important:



Having all or most features covered, to an appropriate depth (neither too “techy” nor “dumbed-down”) is important to consumers.

## Readability

Interestingly, *readability* (that is, how easy a manual is to read and follow), virtually tied with completeness:



A readable manual, one that is jargon-free, translated effectively, and written in plain, easy-to-understand language is critically important to consumers.

## **What Consumers Don't Want**

Depth (how much detail is provided for any given feature) came in as a very low priority, yet that is often what engineer-written manuals provide.

## **Pet Peeves**

There were some things commonly done in product manuals that consumers particularly disliked, such as:

- A single manual containing multiple languages, something manufacturers routinely do to minimize production costs. 88% of those surveyed—a strong majority— either disliked or actively hated this practice. In casual conversation, this feature is commonly cited as the **most repellent thing about product manuals**.
- A single manual covering multiple models of a product (such as a cordless phone or A/V receiver manual that covers three similar models). Again, a strong majority—91%—of those surveyed cited this as something they disliked or actively hated.

## **Gold Stars**

The news is not all bad. Consumers particularly liked the following common features:

- The toll-free support number prominently positioned (52% stated that this feature is “required”).
- Multiple illustrations showing the different connecting devices (where appropriate). This gathered a 39% “required” rating, with 54% stating they felt it was “kind of neat.”
- A “connection” or “quick start” guide that was separate from the day-to-day usage manual. 39% rated this as “required,” with 56% feeling it was “neat.”

## **Suggested Improvements**

Since this area was free-form (no specific suggestions provided), the survey produced a wide range of answers. Here are some of the more popular:

- **Make it easy to understand.** 20% of the respondents said manuals were simply too hard to

understand, with many saying that most manuals are just not “reader-friendly.” Some specific things that can improve this are removing or at least explaining jargon or industry-insider terms, providing better illustrations and examples, and including a better (or *any*) index.

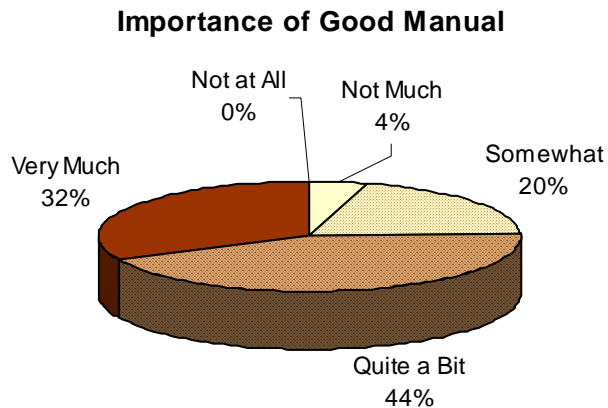
- **Make sure the writing is good.** Respondents were particularly distressed by manuals where the worst problem was poor translation. Many respondents also wanted better technical information that was simplified, but not “dumbed down.”

## What Do Those Manuals Say About the Company?

But all of the previous statistics simply illustrate specific problems with the manuals themselves. The real problem for the industry lies in what those problems say to consumers about the company and the company's products.

## Importance of the Manual

76% of those surveyed felt that the manual was at least somewhat important, with the majority saying they felt the manual was quite important:



Indeed, in a recent survey administered by the Consumer Electronics Association<sup>4</sup>, 10% of the consumers surveyed directly cited product documentation as an improvement manufacturers could make to reduce returns. See “What Is Bad Documentation Costing the Industry?” on page 9 for more details.

---

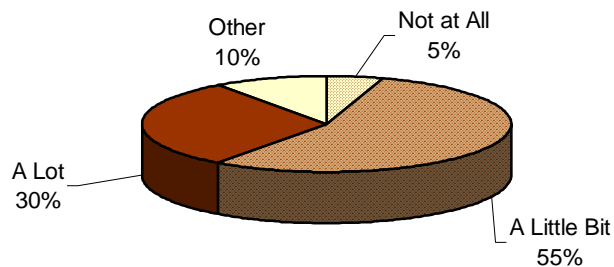
<sup>4</sup> “CE Returns Rates & Issues”, presented by Sean Warga of CEA, in San Francisco, October 2002

## Product Usability

Clearly, manuals are an important part of the consumer experience. A study by Creative Good, an interface-design consulting firm, shows that for every dollar spent on the consumer experience a company gains \$60 in total revenue (as opposed to as 1:5 ratio for advertising return on investment).<sup>5</sup> Consumers feel they have a good experience when they can use the product effectively, without feeling stupid.

Manual Labour's study shows that customers see a direct link between a good manual and being able to use a product effectively:

**How Experience Affected Opinion  
Ease-of-Use**



Clearly, a bad experience with the manual can color a consumer's perception of the entire product. Answers in the "Other" category highlighted this point further:

- "worry [sic] that I might damage something"
- "couldn't use product; took it back"
- "it makes me fearful that the product is cheap"

This concern affects other areas of product performance as well.

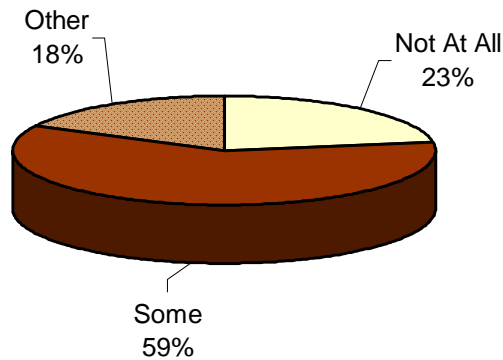
---

<sup>5</sup> "Holiday '99 Ecommerce", Creative Good, September 1999

## Product Reliability

Consumers also form an opinion of a product's reliability based on their experience with a manual. From the same study:

### How Experience Affected Opinion Reliability



Over half the respondents felt that the product was less reliable after a bad experience with the manual. Again, “Other” answers shed additional light:

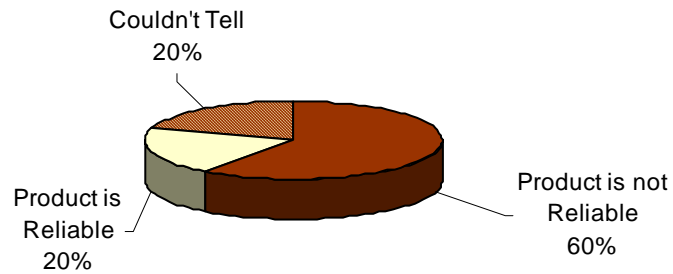
- “refuse to buy from company again”
- “geez, is THIS customer service?”
- “totally unreliable; couldn't use it”
- “I feel I wasted money on features I can't use”
- “is it a problem or operator error, how do I know”
- “They don't know quite what is going on”

Bear in mind that none of the respondents reported an actual *problem* or malfunction of their product; these perceptions are gleaned entirely from a bad experience with the manual.

Manual Labour performed another study as part of a usability test for a manual improvement project. Respondents in this study did not interact with the product; they were simply asked to evaluate the product based on the manual(s) they saw.

Respondents had a chance to view the existing product manual first:

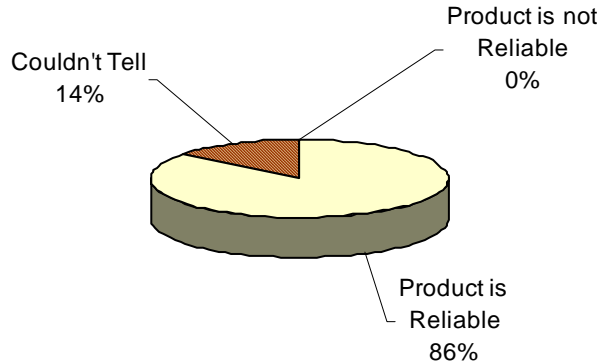
### Assessment of Product Reliability Before Revision



Based on nothing more than examining the manual, they concluded that the product was unreliable, *simply because the manual was confusing.*

The same respondent base was shown the improved manual:

### Assessment of Product Reliability After Revision



They still had not seen or used the product itself, but *based solely on a more usable-looking manual*, consumers made the assessment that the product was more reliable.

## What Is Bad Documentation Costing the Industry?

The negative perceptions discussed above cost the industry in a variety of ways, including contributing to the cost of returns, driving customer hotline costs up, and costing the company in lost sales.

## Cost in Returns

Currently, the consumer electronics industry is experiencing an annual \$10 billion dollar product return cost hit<sup>6</sup>—and it won't cost the industry even \$1 billion (10% of the total current cost) to improve product manuals. As mentioned under “Suggested Improvements”, on page 5, 10% of the consumers surveyed would like better manuals. If this translates to consumer behavior, simply improving the manuals can deliver a return on investment.

## Cost in Customer Support

There's a **hidden cost** to poor manuals that many manufacturers don't see because one executive is in charge of the development budget while another is responsible for the support budget.

When manuals do not contain the necessary information, or when that information is not presented in a useful way to the consumer, consumers **call the hotline**.

## *Increased Hotline Costs*

When hotline usage escalates, manufacturers have two choices: tolerate longer wait times, or hire more support specialists. Both options have significant costs. The longer the wait time, the more alienated the consumer becomes, and the less enjoyable their product experience. That translates to a loss of future sales (see “Cost in Future Sales” on page 12). The cost to increase hotline staff is obvious; however, the return on that investment is subtle at best.

The answer is to avoid these costs.

## *An Example of Cost Avoidance*

It doesn't take a huge reduction in support costs to justify the expense of a good manual. Let's look at an example:

A typical consumer electronic manual for a home stereo device, developed from scratch, according to Manual Labour's development process, costs around \$25,000.

---

<sup>6</sup> “CE Returns Rates & Issues”, presented by Sean Warga of CEA, in San Francisco, October 2002

Let's say the manufacturer of that device has an average call load for that model of 200 calls a month. Each call lasts about 5 minutes. Let's also say that the manufacturer has determined that the real cost for their hotline is \$19.50/minute<sup>7</sup>.

That means that the total support cost burden for the device is:

Call load (per month)	200
Call time (in minutes)	5
Cost per minute	\$19.50
Cost per call (call time x cost per minute)	\$97.50
Cost per month (cost per call x call load)	\$19,500.00
<b>Cost per year (cost per month x 12)</b>	<b>\$234,000.00</b>

The improved manual only needs to reduce the call load by **one call per day** (21 calls per month, an 11% reduction) for the effort to break even. Double that (reduce by 2 calls per day), and the manufacturer will *reduce* costs by \$25,000 *per year*.

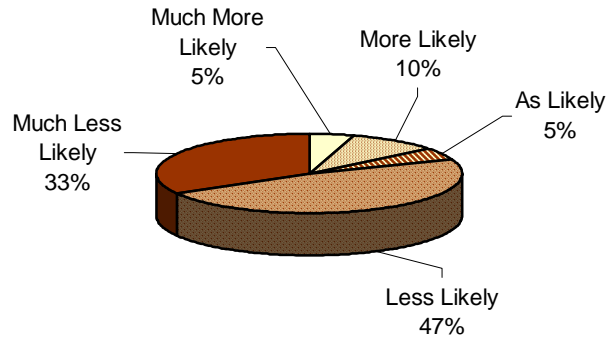
---

<sup>7</sup> This number should include a variety of often-overlooked items, such as support staff wages (loaded to include benefits and taxes); pro-rated office space, phone charges, utilities, and other facilities costs; pro-rated and depreciated capital equipment such as custom call routing software and hardware; training; turnover costs, etc.

## Cost in Future Sales

48% of respondents in the Manual Labour survey said they even examine product manuals (where possible) before they purchase. An equal percentage (48%) said they changed their mind about which manufacturer's product to buy—and 80% of that group were **less** likely to buy that product after reading the manual:

**If Changed Mind, More or Less Likely?**

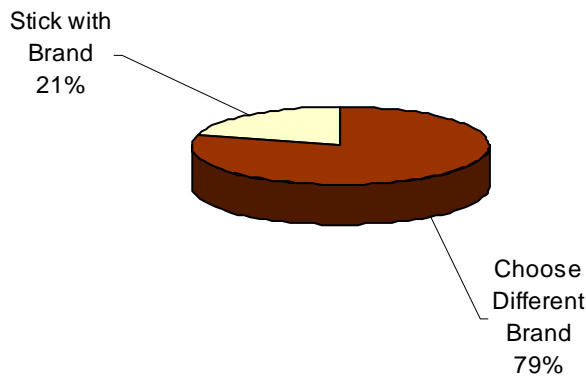


According to the Consumer Electronics Association, sales of CE products are expected to approach \$100 billion. It only makes sense for manufacturers to do everything they can to make sure those dollars are not spent with the competition.

## Likelihood of Further Purchase

Consumers who have a bad experience with a manual after they purchase are **at least three times more likely** to choose a different brand when they replace the product:

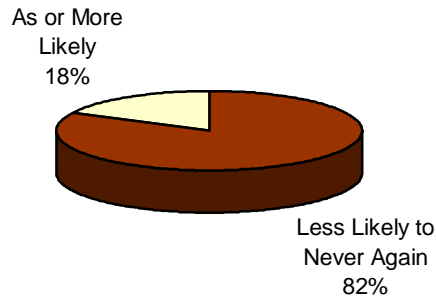
**Likelihood of Purchasing a Different Brand**



79% said that they would look to the competition for a replacement product.

And they're likely to abandon a manufacturer for more than just the replacement product:

### Likelihood of Future Purchase from Company



Over four times as many consumers reported that, not only would they not look to the manufacturer to replace the product with a bad manual, they were less likely to purchase *any other product* from that same manufacturer.

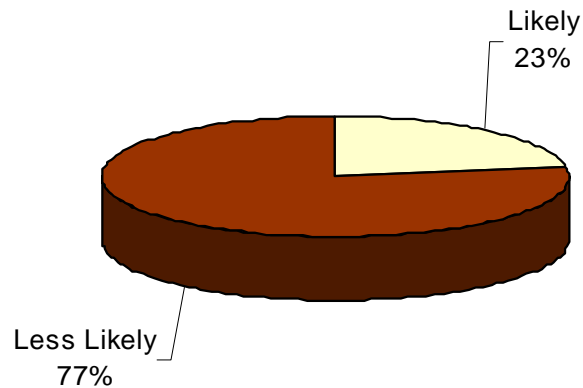
This represents a troubling picture to manufacturers. One can make the case that, since most manuals are bad, consumers will simply swap around and around and no one will really lose market share. On the other hand, manufacturers who pay attention to delivering quality manuals with their quality products are likely to reap the rewards delivered by a grateful market base.

### **Likelihood of Recommendation**

A grateful market base has friends. Word of mouth is a powerful advertising tool. People like to show that they have discerning taste and expertise, and one of the easiest ways to do that is to recommend the products they buy to others. Marketing experience shows that happy customers not only buy more themselves, but also recommend a product, store, or manufacturer to about seven friends or colleagues.

Unfortunately, manufacturers are missing out here as well. The converse statistic is that an *unhappy* customer will tell 20 friends and colleagues about a bad experience. Consumers report that they are less likely to recommend a product with a poor manual:

### Likelihood of Recommending Brand



This is another market segment lost to a poor manual.

## How Can Manufacturers Capture More Market Share?

As these numbers show, providing good manuals is important. As more manufacturers enter the market, more strategies will be necessary to attract and keep consumers loyal to a brand. Compared to the costs of handling returns, maintaining and increasing a consumer hotline, losing sales, and creating unhappy customers, the cost of creating a good manual is trivial.

## Why Manufacturers Haven't

But, manufacturers argue, we don't have the *time* to deliver a good manual. Once the product is finished, we barely have time to get any manual back from the printer, let alone develop a good one. In fact, this shows that the decision to produce a bad manual is just that: a decision, not an inevitability.

There is also the perception (hopefully now dispelled) that it doesn't matter because consumers don't read the manuals anyway. In this paper, we've shown that consumers *do* read the manual, but simply don't—or can't—find the information they need.

## **What Can Manufacturers Do?**

Fortunately, the fix is simple and comparatively inexpensive: create better manuals. Hire or contract with professionals who have built a career out of and amassed expertise in understanding readers and their needs. Bring them in early and work with them to formulate a plan to document the things that are less likely to change first, then document more volatile features as they stabilize.

Capturing (or recapturing) market share lost to dissatisfied consumers is critical to the ongoing success of every consumer electronics manufacturer. Fortunately, for at least part of the problem, the cure is inexpensive, easily obtained, and provides a handsome return on investment in operating costs and customer satisfaction.

### ***About the Author***

Bonni Graham is the president and CEO of Manual Labour, Inc., a full-service technical documentation firm that supports the consumer electronics industry. As a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Technical Communication and a popular presenter, she helps define and guide the theory and practice of technical communication. As an instructor at two University of California campuses, she trains the next generation of technical communicators.

### ***About Manual Labour***

Manual Labour, Inc provides technical communications services to the consumer electronics industry. These services include:

- Preparation of consumer manuals (for both online and print delivery) for new or redesigned products
- Market & audience analysis for upgrades to consumer manuals for existing products
- Consulting to publications departments on improved development methods
- Consulting (hiring and policy formation) to manufacturers looking to create publications departments

For more information about Manual Labour's services, contact our Customer Development department at

619-768-2389 or visit our web page at  
<http://www.manuallabour.com>.