

## NEW MEDIA

### Throw away the manual – join a community!

Can you remember the last time you got a printed manual with a computer program? It might be quite some time ago. The tomes of user documentation are becoming rare. If any documentation on paper is delivered with software at all, it often is an installation guide, filled with warnings and terms of guarantee. In the best cases, it also contains an overview of what the program you just bought is meant to do, but even that information often comes too late. Wouldn't consumers want to know what a program is about *before* they decide to spend the money?

The days of paper user documentation seem to be numbered, and that's not surprising given its limitations. From the users' point of view, it is limited because it doesn't allow quick, directed search and multi-medial explanations. When in need of support, users have to stop doing their work, find the manual, locate the right information, understand and evaluate it as useful, and apply it successfully to the program. From the software producers' point of view, paper documentation is expensive to produce and ship, and inflexible when the software is updated. No wonder that new forms of user documentation have become the standard.

#### Online help

The most widely used form of user documentation at the moment is online help, such as the support to be found by selecting the question mark icon in Microsoft Windows (Figure 1). Help facilities are, in fact, programs within the



Figure 1 Online help with three access mechanisms:  
Table of content, Index and Search

software, or sub-sites within larger web sites. The help program provides some explanation and overview, but mainly how-to information. Users can find the solutions to their problems by accessing the help program through a table of contents (thematic organization), an index (alphabetical organization) or a keyword search (terms defined by user). Apart from this search facility, online help is much like an electronic book. Just like traditional books, it has to be opened next to the program and the translation of information into actions in the software is to be performed by the user.

Some on-line help programs allow you to enter your question in your own words, rather than expressing your problem in the terms and jargon of the program. Those help

programs can ‘understand’ natural language; given the situation, probably the language of frustrated and desperate computer users. This could have solved a major problem in finding the desired support in user documentation, if the success rate of the natural language interfaces had been high. Currently, most natural language interfaces do not offer much more support than the keyword search facility does.

## Wizards

In the last few years, various forms of online user support have emerged that are more integrated with the software or with the tasks the users try to perform. Currently, the most notable type of new user support is an ‘intelligent agent’ piece of software within the software, often called wizard. The wizard ‘walks’ you through tasks like installing new software, setting up a database or designing a presentation. Under the surface, the wizard executes all the functions

needed for the task, just asking for your confirmation. Figure 2a and 2b show parts of the wizard of the program WinZip, a program for compressing (‘zipping’) and unfolding (‘unzipping’) files.

WinZip is an interesting example of a program that almost coincides with its wizard. Very few people seem to use the ‘full’ program, WinZip Classic. What the program actually does with the files, remains completely hidden to people using the wizard, and it doesn’t seem to bother them.

The WinZip Wizard demonstrates a paradox that applies to all integrated user support: the best user support doesn’t interfere with the tasks you are performing and hence is ‘invisible’. However that same characteristic is a major limitation of wizard-type online help. You don’t have a clue about what you are actually doing. Wizards rarely offer background information about the procedures they support. They don’t help you to build a mental model of the task at hand, nor do they offer you any reflection on the choices made or the reasons to do things in a particular way. For a program like WinZip that might not be a problem, as it supports a well-



Figure 2a WinZip Wizard, opening screen with all the explanatory information provided in the program.



Figure 2b WinZip Wizard, screen in which users select a file and confirm execution of procedures on that file.

defined task with little room for strategic choices. But how about wizards for business letters, presentations of financial results, or resumes? The suggestion that a wizard would do for such a composing task defies basic notions of rhetoric, that is, creating a text adapted to its context of use, audiences, and the (institutional) author's goals and personal style.

### Interface-based help

Another form of help information integrated in the software is interface-based help. You probably have noticed the little annotations that appear on screen when you move the mouse over a button or icon. On Web pages, they are called 'mouse-overs'. The interface-based help often contains short, explanatory notes.

The advantage of mouse-overs and other forms of interface-based help is that you get support right on the spot. However this type of help also has its limitations. It is only helpful when you know which button or icon to use, as it appears only when you move your mouse over the button or click the right hand mouse button when the mouse is located over the icon. So you must have a mental model of the functions available in the software and the icons or buttons belonging to the functions. Therefore, it serves as a reminder of what a button or icon means, rather than as information about what to do with it. Another limitation is the size: it can contain only a little piece of text and no graphics.

Figure 3 shows an interesting combination of wizard-type help and interface-based help. The figure shows the regular interface of a video-editing program. It walks you through the successive steps, which are shown in the tabs (global level steps) and the numbered list on the left (detail level steps). It contains a list of options, for each step in the frame at the right. The little box at the bottom gives explanatory information about the options. The interface of the program and the documentation for the task to be performed

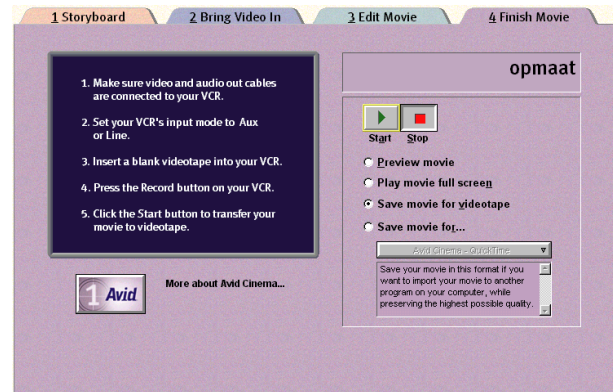


Figure 3 Interface design, combining wizard-type information, annotation, and procedural information (AVID Cinema)

are completely integrated. The creators of the interface have overcome the limitations of both wizards and mouse-overs. The lack of jargon on screen demonstrates that even complex activities such as video-editing, can be explained in relatively simple language.

### Internet-based user support

All the help systems mentioned so far are included in the programs, but companies have started to use the internet increasingly as the channel of user support. Initially, the Web was chosen because distribution of the documentation was easy, that is, easy for the software producer but not necessarily for the users of the software. Users could find solutions to their problems in documents to be downloaded or as answers to Frequently Asked Questions. The advantage of this, from the users' point of view is that the storage space is unlimited, so companies might offer documentation for every need, and for various groups of users. Users can also be sure the documentation is not outdated. Finally, it offers the possibility of

supporting users with information presented in real multi-media, like CD-Roms, but with lower delivery costs. Figure 4 shows an example of a web site with multi-media 'live' manuals for products like telephones, microwaves, and video-recorders. The site convincingly demonstrates the power of simulations to explain procedures. The simulations allow you to push the device buttons (on screen) and see the effects of your actions. A guided tour for each simulation shows the intended use of the features of the products.

In a way, however, internet delivery of documentation is a step backwards: the information is not integrated in the program nor in the task performed. Like in paper documentation and standard on-line help, it is the user who has to interpret and translate the information in the manual to suit

the real product or task at hand.

Internet-based support also makes good use of the interactive nature of the internet, which appears to have two major effects on the user documentation. First of all, user documentation is offered as a part of a whole array of customer services, available through the company's web site. Therefore, it is becoming the responsibility of marketing and customer relationship departments, rather than software development departments. That creates hopes for more user-centered documentation. Secondly, user support is changing from a one-way stream of information into real interaction and dialogue, either between software producers and users, or among users. Figure 5 shows the array of user support features one software company is offering.

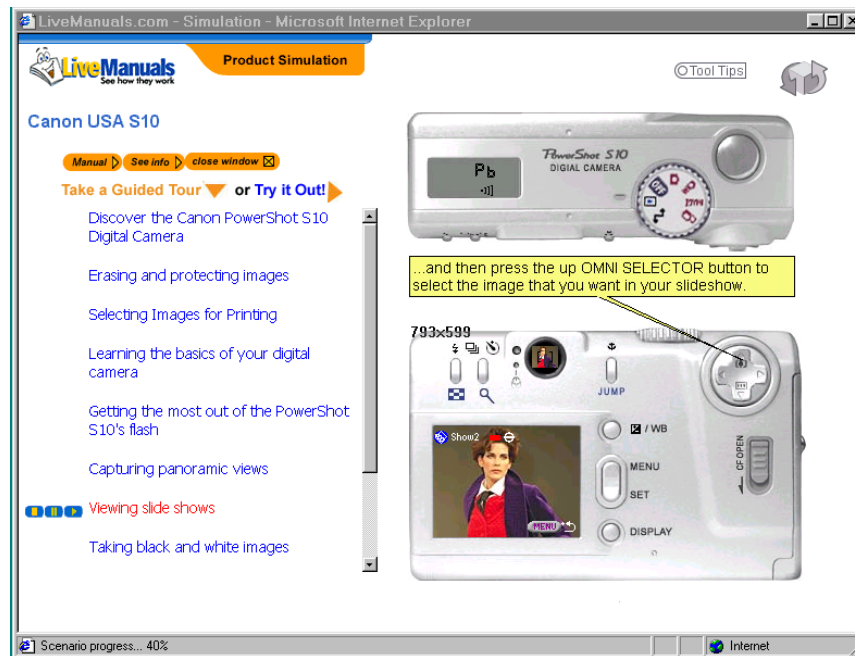


Figure 4 Live manual of digital camera (www.Livemanuals.com)

Besides the more ‘traditional’ user documentation in the form of technical guides and answers to questions, the company offers *User-to-User Forums* and a *Support Exchange*. In user-to-user forums, the users of a particular software package share questions, suggestions, and information. The underlying philosophy (or business model?) is that the users consider themselves a ‘community’, with members who want to share their expertise with each other for free. Communities work well when their members can expect benefits that match the demands of the membership. The benefits for those who seek information are obvious, whereas the benefits for information providers in the user-to-user forums are often immaterial, e.g., gaining status as an expert in a professional community, or meeting people with the same interests. The benefits for the software company are the most obvious: it has expanded its user support department with a set of devoted volunteers. This might work as

long as the users don’t consider their community membership to be unpaid work for a company.

The community model is replaced by a more commercial form of user-to-user communication in the Support Exchange. You can present your questions or problems in an ‘auction’. Any Exchange member with the expertise demanded can offer to answer the question or solve the problem for a certain price. Of course, a problem that requires highly specialized expertise will cost more than a more general question. Also, the speed of providing the answer might influence the price. As in any auction, you would like to have guarantees about the reliability of the bidder and the quality of the answer provided. The Support Exchange has a rating system, in which providers of answers and solutions are reviewed by those who bought their services. The difference between the User-to-User forum and the Support Exchange is that the problem solver can earn money by providing.

The screenshot displays the Adobe CustomerFirst Support page. The top navigation bar includes links for Store, Products, Support, and Corporate. The Support section is expanded to show Knowledgebase, Training, Exchange, Forums, Announcements, and Survey. The main content area is titled 'CustomerFirst Support' and features several sections:

- Search the Support Knowledgebase:** Search our knowledgebase of answers and browse the top issues lists.
- Technical Guides:** Suggested workflows, underlying concepts, and step-by-step problem solving for Adobe products presented in a graphically rich format.
- Training:** Self-paced online lessons, training books and videos, Adobe Certified Training Providers, events and seminars to help you get the most from your Adobe products.
- Adobe Support Exchange:** Online technical support provided by ePeople™. Submit your question and certified, experienced Support Providers will answer it. You pay a per-incident fee only after your request is resolved to your satisfaction.
- User to User Forums:** Share your Adobe product questions and experiences with other Adobe users.
- Support Announcements via E-mail:** Stay current on the latest news from the Adobe User Forums community, and receive announcements about the latest technical how-tos, patches, and plug-ins for selected Adobe products.

On the right side, there is a section for 'Adobe Support Exchange' with a cartoon illustration of a person holding a megaphone. Below it is a 'Quick Links' section with categories: Downloads (File downloads, Help downloading files), Buying (Adobe Store, Adobe resellers, Returns and exchanges, Product replacements), Licensing (Product registration, Transfer of ownership, Using Adobe products at work & home, Volume Licensing & Upgrades, Adobe logos, trademarks, & images, Software piracy), and Adobe Partners & Programs (Adobe service providers, User Groups & Professional Association, ASB Developer Program). A 'Got Some Time to Take a Survey?' button is also visible at the bottom left.

Figure 5 Array of customer support features (www.Adobe.com)

Whatever form on-line user assistance takes, information from the screen is harder to process and apply than the kind of help most people prefer: the colleague or friend next door, to whom you can turn at anytime and who adapts the answers to your level of expertise. Since the User-to-User Forum and the Support Exchange come closest to this ideal of having a personal assistant, it may well become the dominant form of user assistance in the future.

### Source

Farkas, David K. (2001) *The Future of User Assistance*. Guest lecture for the Writing Computer Documentation course. University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands. May 10, 2001.

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