WHIRLPOOL AND XEROX: A RECIPE FOR INSTANT USER GUIDES

Go into Whirlpool Sweden AB, and you simply won’t find a spare user guide anywhere. What’s more, Whirlpool is absolutely delighted by this complete lack of stock.

Whirlpool Sweden effectively makes one product, microwave ovens — 1.1 million of them in 1996. Ninety percent of those ovens are exported to Europe, North and South America, Asia and Australia. The reason Whirlpool is so pleased about the total absence of spare user guides is because getting rid of them has gotten rid of a major problem — in time and cost terms.

Dan Lyokebo, Whirlpool’s Process Manager, explains: “As most line manufacturers of durable consumer products will tell you, a user guide isn’t simply a piece of print you drop into the box. It’s a piece part. In other words, it’s on the production line with all the other pieces, and has to be integrated into the production program. However, using conventional printing techniques, you can’t make it behave like a piece part, and that’s where the problem is.”
Conventional Printing Issues

Jan Carmblad, Senior Whirlpool Buyer, takes up the story. “It was this scenario I was asked to look at in 1994. The reason a conventional user guide can’t behave like a piece part is to do with the lead time it takes to produce it. Each day we have sunrise meetings, and we’re able to decide, on a daily basis, how many microwaves are to be produced. In other words,” Carmblad continues, “we’ve reached a zero stock situation, so no capital gets tied up in a warehouse. Unfortunately, you can’t plan like that when it comes to user guides. Normal offset printing, combined with all the pre-production and post-production procedures, dictates a three to four week lead time.

“So, you have to: a) wait three to four weeks for new stock, b) sit on stock and draw it off slowly, or c) waste stock if any printed information has to change. Now imagine these three restrictions multiplied across the need for 20 different languages. You’re not talking about peanuts!”

Solution Driven Thinking

According to Carmblad, “There’s a lot of hype about solutions driven thinking, but in a situation like this, it really is the only way to proceed. In other words, you have to sit down and say, ‘We’ve defined the problem, now define the solution.’ Forget about how the solution is achieved, first produce a proper statement of need.”

Carmblad was asked to set up a project team on this basis. He invited Rank Xerox Sweden to be a team partner. John Frojd, Rank Xerox Sweden AB, takes up the story.

“The solutions definition was precisely the right way to go,” Frojd says. “We sat down with Whirlpool and created the statement of need. It went something like this:
a) exactly the right number of user guides on a daily basis
b) no drawing down from stock
c) therefore, virtually instant creation, meaning in practice a reduction in lead time from three to four weeks down to eight hours
d) everything handled in-house
e) any language versions
f) ability to change text at a moment’s notice

In-House Production

“We also needed to revisit the pre-production stages,” says Lyokebo. “It would be rather self-defeating to have the production capability we wanted, but to go outside for graphic design and artwork. But it took no time at all to work out we’d be better off setting up an in-house graphics department.”

This new facility includes a Macintosh PowerMac running QuarkXPress 3.13, PageMaker 6.0, Word 6.0, Freehand 5.0, Illustrator 5.5 and Photoshop 3.0. Translation is handled by Whirlpool’s nationalisation centre in Italy. The centre provides the new graphics department with translated text in up to 20 languages by electronic media. Finished user guides are then sent in PostScript format to the DocuTech via a local Novell network.

Cost Savings

“So, the final and crucial question was, given the transformed ability to produce on-demand user guides in every language, and given the obvious and massive time savings, what about the savings in costs? Lyokebo, not surprisingly, has this worked out. After all, how else do you secure the hearts and minds of finance directors these days?”

“Given that we’re talking about 30-40 million pages to print in 1996,” Lyokebo says, “we estimate a saving of around SEK 100,000 per week. Watch my lips, per week!”