

Good manual, better product

To many ears, 'product manual' has a nasty ring to it. Suunto, a successful sports instruments manufacturer, is well aware of this fact. This is why the company has invested considerable resources in user documentation during the past few years. The goal is simple: by improving the user documentation, Suunto aims to enhance users' overall product experience.

The past eighteen months have marked a change in the planning and implementation of Suunto's user documentation. "Traditionally, a manual provided with the product was the sole channel used for distributing documentation. Some time ago we started looking for a more comprehensive approach and more versatile channels," says **Kimmo Pernu**, head of Suunto's design team. On his wrist is Suunto t1, the simplest model of the company's range of heart rate monitors.

Investing in user documentation has meant measures such as involving documentation professionals from the very start of the R&D process, and building a team of specialists: **Christian Nordström**, who has studied information design, joined the Suunto team as a user documentation specialist. He was half-seriously instructed to make his own position redundant.





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easy to read and not too bulky.**
– Christian Nordström

"Our final vision is to eliminate the need for a user manual – ideally, products should be easy to use without access to a separate manual. The user manual would only add to the user experience and open new opportunities for the user," says Nordström. He wears the Suunto Core wristop computer, which has won an award for its design.

Involved from the very start

If you wish to ensure not only top-class technical features but also top-class usability, certain basic questions must be answered early on: What are the benefits the product offers to its users? What will the product look like? How shall we tell customers about it? Involving user documentation specialists from the very beginning of the R&D process lets you answer these questions and provides an invaluable extra angle with regard to important decisions.

"Everyone involved in the R&D process will have to consider user documentation at some stage: the contribution of developers and marketing professionals alike is needed," Pernu explains.

He sees Suunto as being exceptionally well positioned when it comes to the overall management of the R&D chain and thus also user documentation management, since the company controls all parts of the chain itself.

Challenges: uniform approach and overall image

For the Suunto team, user documentation covers almost all material that is aimed at end users and contains instructions on how to use the product. In addition to a user manual, users also have access to various Web solutions or maintenance and Help Desk services.

"Content creation is based on user needs. A good user manual is visually attractive and easy to read, and not too bulky," Nordström says.

Creating a user manual is also easier, if you don't have to explain everything. It is possible to make an impact also in this respect, when the user documentation specialists are part of the core R&D team.

One of the challenges faced by multi-channel distribution of user information is retaining the consistency of material. Suunto's response to this problem has been to intensify the collaboration between product development, sales and marketing. This also ensures that the team does not need to reinvent the wheel every time: the production of user documentation for a new product seldom has to start from scratch.

"We are also responsible for creating user manuals that respond to our customers' needs, and carry out user surveys to ensure this

is also the case. AAC Global also acts as a sparring partner in the development of user documentation," Nordström says.

Together with AAC Global, Suunto has paid particular attention to clarifying objectives, developing user documentation and utilizing existing information in different channels.

Usability under the microscope 24/7

The Suunto team is satisfied with the benefits obtained through the development of user documentation. Nordström also has a piece of advice to give to those involved in the creation of user documents:

It is about stepping into another person's shoes. Rather than lacking information, we are now drowning in it. You must make information simpler, even though this is not an easy task. There is a lot to explore, such as the various ways in which people wish to receive information. Some may wish to obtain an overall picture of the product, while others are only interested in a specific feature.

The instruments worn by Pernu and Nordström during the interview also reflect the respect of individual and different opinions – Suunto employees are also themselves continuously providing user experiences on all of their products:

"Living among our products and using them daily also gives us new approaches to usability. An hour from now, you would probably see me wearing a new model," Nordström says, smiling.

He also claims that you only need to take a short trip along the corridor to come across an employee wearing four wristop products simultaneously. The team is clearly passionate about usability and familiarity with the company's own products.

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