

by PAULA M. POWERS

Electronic Manuals:

Higher Tech, Higher Value

Dennis Finneran wants to franchise his successful restaurant business. When he and his restaurant managers review their processes and procedures they find operational inconsistencies among the restaurants.

Mary's equipment malfunctions. Nobody knows how to fix it. She can't find the supervisor or the "cut sheets." Customers are waiting. She races to the back room and stares glassy-eyed at the row of dusty three-ring binders on the shelf. "Where do I begin to look?" she wonders.

Across town, a franchisor reviews a recent invoice from his printer. Although his business does well, he must often make operational changes to remain competitive, requiring continual updates to his operations manuals. He can't believe the cost of republishing them.

Sound familiar? Franchisors often experience problems such as documenting processes and procedures in preparation for a franchise offering—while simultaneously allowing for individual creativity, organizing essential information so employees can get the information they need when they need it, and cutting costs and increasing profits.

Franchisors find solutions to these problems in technology. For instance, Jennifer DePaola, director of human resources and training for Ruby's Diner, says, "We are working toward electronic operations manuals. Our employees grew up with computers and are comfortable with doing searches and getting information electronically."

This trend toward electronic methods will enable companies to update documentation and training materials more easily and deliver them via CD, DVD, the



Internet, or an intranet. Whether building new processes and procedures in preparation for a franchise offering or editing existing manuals, companies using electronic media can provide information and training whenever or wherever necessary, with easier access and greater flexibility.

With the rapid decrease in the cost of electronic media, more prospective and existing franchisors are considering electronic approaches. Phil Crowley, vice president of operations for Lawry's Restaurants, says, "I have two dozen technology-related initiatives on my wish list that will help me build the brand. We want to be more competitive and increase our revenues and profits."

To successfully migrate existing operations manuals and training materials to electronic media, companies must do more than simply post existing files on an intranet or on a CD. As a franchising executive, you must take the following key steps to take full advantage of existing and future technology.

Step 1: Review your existing processes and procedures.

Identify the key processes that are essential to your brand and that will not change. Identify missing information, processes, and procedures that require further development. Look for best practices that will breed success. Matt Plaskoff, president and CEO of Plaskoff Construction and CEO of One Week Bath, has learned that you need to "put in place the procedures that you think will work best. Capitalize on the brain trust of potential or existing franchisees. Ask them to participate in the development and fine tuning of operational procedures. This will minimize changes in the future."

Step 1 Output: A list of your existing and missing processes and procedures with the critical ones identified

Step 2: Develop a learning plan, your road map to success.

You now apply the old adage: "If you don't know where you are going, you will never get there." Develop a learning plan as a way to focus on your business functions, personnel and training issues, identify shortcomings, and PLAN for future business improvements. The learning plan ensures that you will meet your business objectives. It is vital to your success.

Review your business plan and your immediate strategic goals and objectives.

Referring to the list from Step 1, identify the processes or procedures that will enable you to meet your business plan, goals, and objectives more effectively and efficiently.

For example, you want to double the number of units in the next two years. As you review the list from Step 1, you find some "corporate" policies that are not appropriate for franchisees, policies that don't reflect your process improvements, or manuals that are cumbersome and difficult to reference. Perhaps you need a documented hiring/recruiting process to increase the likelihood that you can locate the quality talent you must hire to produce the additional units. You must evaluate and overhaul your operations manuals before you can make an initial franchise offering or successfully expand. Because of the additional expense of republishing your manuals, you consider electronic versions.

One of your financial goals may be to lower equipment maintenance and repair costs. You find that because the documentation is not readily available or easy to understand, your employees do not perform scheduled maintenance correctly. Research indicates that short digital video clips of the necessary steps required to repair and maintain an expensive piece of equipment can drastically decrease your expenses, assure consistency in deployment, and add to the profit margin. You find that you can deliver them via DVD, Internet, intranet, or a handheld electronic device like a PDA (also called mobile learning, or m-learning). You list that as an area for further research.

Diane Martell, director of training for Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, which has a large international franchise base, says, "Electronic methods enable us to change more rapidly. Our paper-based manuals were often obsolete before they were published. For us, distance is an issue. I don't need as many bodies delivering training when I look at the options offered by e-learning."

Step 2 Output: A learning plan that identifies the missing information, additional areas of concern, actions to be taken, desired media method used, and an implementation schedule

Step 3: Create and edit the information.

You must take this most critical step because the information in your paper-based operations manual is not organized in a manner that works well with electronic

delivery. If you upload a duplicate of the paper-based manual, you will not increase its effectiveness, you will just make it cheaper to distribute. Employees who do not use their paper-based operations manual now will not use one on their computer screen in the future.

To get employees to use the new system effectively, you must reorganize the information so that it is easier to locate required information more quickly than paging through an unwieldy three-ring binder. Even if you won't implement an electronic library for another year, you should reorganize the information now.

Start by developing the missing content identified in Step 1. Involve franchisees to ensure that the documentation will be consistent and timely. Keep all procedures under seven steps in length because lengthy, multi-page procedures are cumbersome to use, frustrating to update, and don't transfer well to electronic methods. Create short "chunks" of information that you can easily organize now, and that you can link in the future to Google-type searches of your electronic library.

As the first step to creating an electronic library, some companies convert their existing Microsoft Word operations manual files to Adobe Acrobat files, which have limited search capabilities. Jennifer DePaola of Ruby's Diner says, "The problem with the electronic version is that you need to know where to look for the information. Procedures for receiving produce, for example, could be located in the food and beverage manual or the operations manual. Organizing information according to its use and linking it to other functional areas should be considered when preparing information for electronic delivery."

As you complete the content of your manuals, identify the information that will remain consistent over time (core processes), the information that is likely to change because of automation or electronic systems, and the processes or procedures that are challenging or not well-implemented.

Step 3 Output: Completed operations manuals, including all processes and procedures, formatted into smaller chunks

Step 4: Review manual contents, identify links, and tag.

(This step is used only if migrating the manual to an electronic library capable of "natural word" searches such as Google.)

Review your learning plan, in which you identified future electronic methods of delivery for certain content. Review the completed manual to identify the information, processes, or procedures that are repeated or referenced in other parts of the manual or in other manuals, such as the produce receiving example referred to in Step Three. Identify processes or procedures that cross functional areas (such as one that involves accounting to warehouse receiving to accounting again). These are most likely the sections in which you will create links between content areas.

Identify topics, processes, or procedures that you can communicate more effectively by digital video. For example, the maintenance procedure for an expensive piece of equipment now written out in the equipment manual might be delivered in the future by digital video. When a competent and experienced IT professional completes the final tagging, you may migrate the information to electronic methods.

Step 4 Output: The operations manual(s) with essential information highlighted or tagged, links between key content identified, and possible locations for future digital video use identified

Step 5: Migrate to electronic media, creating a web of information.

Initially you may decide to create Adobe Acrobat versions of your documentation on a DVD and have the franchisee print them out. In the future, tagged manuals could be delivered via DVD and accessed using a web browser with search capabilities. If you have organized the information properly, the next steps—to move the information to a company intranet, provide more robust searches, and insert useful video clips for key procedures at a later time—will be easy. If you did not create a learning plan, you



may need to repeat Step 4 when you move to future electronic delivery because you did not identify the content during Step 4.

If you have a company intranet, you are a step ahead. Take advantage of it by using it as a repository for key information.

Step 5 Output: An efficient, well-run franchise with happy, contented franchisees and employees

In summary, to take advantage of electronic methods you will need to do the following:

- Review your existing processes and procedures
- Develop a learning plan
- Create and edit the information
- Review manual contents, identify links, and tag
- Migrate to electronic media, creating a web of information

Adult learning theory tells us that adults prefer to use an informal learning environment, require a variety of teaching methods to learn, and are self-directed. An electronic library not only accommodates operations manuals, but can include equipment repair videos, sales information, and methods for capturing best practices. Electronic methods to cover the basics enable you to handle the face-to-face skills that employees learn best in a classroom environment.

Processes and procedures delivered in a more efficient and effective way and which follow adult learning theory create more productive employees. More productive employees lead to greater profits and more opportunity for rapid expansion. As Brandon Gough, president of Juice It Up, selected as the 2004 Franchise of the Year by Entrepreneur magazine, says "Using electronic methods is no longer considered 'nice to have,' it has become a 'must have.' You are not perceived as a professional organization without sophisticated online capabilities." ■

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