

Fat-Free Documents!

They're easier to translate (and much better for your heart)

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Abstract

Today's market demands that we eliminate excess fat from our documents, but how do we do it? Techniques for producing reduced-fat, low-fat and fat-free documents are explored, and the implications of fat-free documentation for users are assessed.

The age of big-binder documentation is over!

Slim, trim volumes are all the rage.

But how do you go about eliminating excess fat from your manuals? There are three popular approaches to a leaner, meaner documentation diet:

- **Reduced-fat documents** that retain most of their original ingredients, but in smaller quantities, so they still "taste good."
These documents are usually the result of such page-cutting measures as removing appendices, converting information-packed paragraphs to lists and tables, and substituting illustrations with call-outs for lengthy descriptions.
- **Low-fat documents** from which all "nice to have" information has been removed, with low-fat ingredients substituted wherever possible. They have a lot of their original "flavor," but you can usually tell something is missing.
These documents bear a striking resemblance to what used to be called "Quick Start Guides," but today they are often all that is shipped with the product. They are written for the lowest common denominator user, so programmers and technicians find them useless.
- **Fat-free documents** made from fat-free ingredients. They start out fat-free, so they don't "taste" bland or watered down—just different.
These documents are characterized by what they do *not* contain. Most of the work that goes into fat-free documents goes toward improving the product and the user interface in order to reduce what needs to be documented.

This idea market looks at some different types of documents (user guides, installation instructions, reference manuals, online help screens, etc.) and explores ways to transform them into reduced-fat, low-fat and fat-free documents. Some of the low-text alternatives include:

- Quick reference cards
- Setup posters
- Icons and metaphors
- Online help for experts as well as novices
- Installation wizards
- Illustrated procedures
- Audio and video tutorials
- Intranet forums to help users help each other

This idea market provides the opportunity to:

- examine some reduced-fat, low-fat and fat-free samples
- speculate on how the new documentation might be produced
- consider the impact of fat-free documentation on translation and internationalization efforts
- share fat-free recipes and techniques with fellow idea shoppers.

But most importantly, the idea market provides a forum for assessing the impact of fat-free documentation on users who suddenly find themselves with fewer or no manuals to guide them. Will they become healthier, more active, and feel better about themselves with less text to deal with? Or will they find themselves missing the satisfaction and security of a full set of detailed manuals?