

Chance (Summer 1994)

To Read or Not to Read? That is, the Instructions

Whenever you get a government form to fill out, it is usually preceded by pages of unintelligible instructions printed in unreadable six-point type. Two and one-half pages are often devoted to the lines calling for name, date, and social security number. That's because government regulations require an agency to explain why it absolutely, positively needs the information and what would happen if it didn't get it, such as the government would come grinding to a halt, you definitely won't get that benefit check you've been waiting years for anyway, and public television wouldn't be able to air reruns of the Roseanne Barr show.

Government agencies, in fact, have to account to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for how much time people waste in filling out their forms. For example, the IRS claims that it takes the average taxpayer 15.7 minutes to complete Tax Form 1040. That's because the IRS doesn't count the time it takes to (a) read the instructions and (b) figure out what in the world the instructions mean. For me, reading and deciphering the IRS instructions usually takes 2.7 months. And that's just for requesting an extension.

The Census Bureau distributes the instructions for filling out the census form along with the form in a booklet. If it's the complex long form you're lucky to get, they're bound under hard covers. When I first received a package in the mail with the census long form, I thought it was another Book-of-the-Month Club selection. I sent it back, saying that, although the characters were interesting, the plot was too complicated for me to follow.

One day, a Census Bureau researcher got a brilliant idea. She gave a few volunteers the census form with instructions, asked them to fill the form out, and watched. (This activity is referred to as *focus-group* research, as distinguished from academic, or *unfocused group*, research.)

What the researcher observed, to her amazement, is that nobody read the instructions! Everybody just started filling out the form. The only time anybody looked at the instructions is when they had a problem with a particular question. The research had a major impact on the Census Bureau. It redesigned the census form by posing, in the first question, an insurmountable problem.

When word got around to the other agencies that nobody was reading their instructions, they all feared the start of a trend. What next might people not read? The habit might spill over to the *Federal Register*. Soon, people would be ignorant of all the rules and regulations pouring daily out of Washington. How would they know how their government expected them to behave?

To address the problem, a group of top-level officials convened an early-morning crisis

session in the Department of Commerce War Room. As they debated the issue into the evening, a lady on the cleaning staff came in to vacuum under their feet. Overhearing them, she asked, "Why don't you give out a telephone number for people with a question to call. Every Thanksgiving, I call 1-800-TURKEYS, because I can't ever remember how many hours to leave a frozen turkey in the oven."

"That's a great idea!" said the IRS official. "Too bad," said the Census Bureau official, "that 1-800-TURKEYS is already spoken for." They all agreed that evening to each set up a toll-free hot line to answer questions about their forms. The Census Bureau settled on 1-800-WE-COUNT. The Federal National Mortgage Association, Fannie Mae, selected 1-800-MY-FANNY. And the ever helpful IRS, chose 1-800-AUDIT-ME.

What the agencies didn't realize is that, if there's a choice between an instruction book and a phone, the phone wins every time. Personal computer makers discovered this the hard way. Their 800 information numbers are now inundated with calls from novices. For example, as actually reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, a Dell Computer Corporation technician received a call by one user complaining about problems operating the foot pedal. It took the technician a while to realize the user was referring to the mouse. Many people called Compaq to ask where the "any" key is in order to respond to the command, "Press Any Key." And, at AST, a customer, in response to a technician's request to send in a copy of a defective floppy disk, mailed in a Xerox copy of the floppy.

Similar problems beset the Census Bureau. We asked those staffing the phones for the last census what were the most frequently asked questions. Here's what we learned:

Top Ten Most Frequently Asked Questions About the Census

10. How do I file for an extension?
9. If my boy friend spent census night with me, how do I count him?
8. How do I list my pet dog, Fido?
7. Does the bathroom count as a room? My husband spends all his time in it.
6. Can I fill the form out this summer, when my son is home from college? Maybe, he can figure it out.
5. Can you send me another census form? I'd like to get all the stats on this gal next door?
4. Can I just mail in a copy of my federal tax return?
3. I'll give you my information, if you'll tell me what Bryant Gumbel makes.

2. Who do I make the check out to?

1. Will the fellow who came by last week to collect my census form like to meet a nice jewish girl?

Additional Reading

Carlton, Jim (1994). Befuddled PC users flood help lines, and no question seems to be too basic. *The Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 1994, p. B1.