

*Compliments of Your Technical Communication Experts at Freund Associates*

**This issue of “Ask Dr. Freund”** is all about making your documents both useful AND beautiful, without having to take the often costly step of hiring a graphic designer or worse, purchasing expensive graphics software. Here are the answers to some of the questions we’ve been asked lately about trends in user documentation and the software we’re using to make documents look good in print and on the Web.



### Question 1:

**What difference does it really make if my documents aren’t beautiful, as long as they do what I need them to do: be clear, concise, and informative?**

**A:** First impressions really do make a difference – especially if the document is the first encounter someone has with your company or product. The basics of branding dictate that your company logo appear somewhere on your document. If your logo is on the piece, then your tag line or branding message should be there, too, along with your contact information and URL (or web address), which is the fastest way to lead a customer to your products and services. When you view your finished work as one more opportunity to create a favorable impression of your company, the benefits of creating the most visually appealing document possible become very clear.

### Question 2:

**If I am not going to hire a graphic designer OR purchase graphic design software, how can I make my documents look as professional as possible?**

**A:** The fast and easy answer is this: learn to be a “power user” of your word processing package, such as Microsoft® Word. Of course, this versatile and ubiquitous word processing program does not have all the bells and whistles of expensive graphic design software, but you don’t necessarily need them to increase the visual appeal of your documents, especially if their principal purpose is to instruct or inform rather than *delight or dazzle*. The leading word processing packages now offer features far beyond simple word processing and text editing. With these improvements, you may not need to use specialized graphics and layout software. You will find, even if you are a beginner, that with a little patience and a little time, you can create a very impressive document that is both beautiful and purposeful. And, you don’t have to go it alone. Ask the design firm that developed your logo/branding to give you the complete “corporate identity standards,” which they used to design the company’s logo, color palette, and typography (e.g., the Red/Green/Blue-RGB numbers, font styles, font sizes, etc.). Why? Because you can set up these same styles and colors in your word processing program, that’s why, helping your documents look both professionally designed and consistent with other publications and branding.

### **Question 3:**

**I don't have the time to become a "power" user of my word processing package, nor does my staff. Other than the basics, we don't know the first thing about design or what colors, fonts, or graphics to use in our documents. Isn't it just easier and faster to have a graphic designer do the job?**

**A:** Easier, yes, because you don't have to do the actual "creative" work yourself. Faster? Not necessarily. You will have to take the time to meet with a designer to explain the project, wait for a first draft, wait for revisions, and wait for a finished product, all while paying a premium for the convenience. Depending on your geographical market, graphic designers can charge anywhere from \$50-\$150 per hour. That's fine if you have the time and budget, but most documentation projects usually don't. And who's going to manage the design process? If graphic design and visual appearance of your final product are important to you, then please put this in your scope of work and make the necessary time and cost adjustments for design. If you don't have the budget or desire to manage the project yourself, then ask a technical communications firm to give you a cost estimate for managing the entire documentation project – from planning to publication online.

### **Question 4:**

**I don't have time to learn the layout and design possibilities of my word processing software, nor do I want to incur the expense of hiring a graphic designer. Do I have any other options?**

**A:** Yes, hire a technical communications firm qualified in procedural writing and certified in Information Mapping®. Today, most documentation specialists are creating professional looking documents in their word processing software and converting them to Adobe® PDF files. They are experts in the capabilities of both programs. A document created initially in MS Word, for example, allows you to "redline" corrections and changes on each draft. Fast and easy, with less chance of miscommunication! Converting the final draft to PDF makes it Web ready.

### **Question 5:**

**What else do I need to know about making my documents "beautiful and purposeful?"**

**A:** While most technical manuals, user guides, and instruction sheets can be created in a word processing program, there will be times when you will be best served by hiring a professional graphic designer; for example, when photographs need to be enhanced or the cover needs to be especially eye-catching. Your document should also look just as good on the Web as it does in print. Gone are the days when you have to spend a fortune on having your documents printed only to throw them away when the information becomes outdated. In fact, documents that were once printed are not being printed at all. Rather than receiving a hard copy in print, customers want to access your web site and view a PDF. They want to print only the page or pages they need. They want to navigate their way around a PDF, using the "search" feature, hyperlinks, or the bookmarks you had the foresight to include. Want to learn more about the latest trends in user documentation? Contact us today, or visit [www.freundassociates.com](http://www.freundassociates.com)...and keep those questions coming!