

What does this button do?

The problem of consumer documentation

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Abstract

The only means of communication between the user and designer of domestic equipment is usually a manual enclosed with the equipment. Notoriously, this documentation is unsatisfactory. If the users' requirements are examined, some problems clearly arise, and some suggestions can be made for their resolution. No single solution is decisive.

Introduction

Most domestic equipment comes with an instruction manual. This is, in practice, the sole communication between the designer and the user. It is therefore required to serve both the purposes of the designer and manufacturer, and those of the user. Anecdotal evidence of mismatches and misunderstandings abounds. Depending on the point of view, these are usually taken to indicate the stupidity of the user or the illiteracy of the designer. It is, however, more productive to consider the real problems these anecdotes illustrate, and how these problems may be solved, or, better, avoided.

The problem

Users do not understand their equipment. This is not unusual, given the sophistication of modern devices. Most car drivers have only a vague idea of how their car really works, but can use it adequately. (Anecdote: I bought and drove a Volvo V90 for several years before realising it had front-wheel drive. It was not mentioned in the driver's manual.) Most users employ only a subset of the functions of their equipment, and may be unaware of some of its capabilities. If the device malfunctions, they may not know what to do.

The naïve model

The implicit model for most documentation is that the user, on receiving the new device, reads the documentation from beginning to end fills in and dispatches the guarantee card, and thereafter remembers every word for the lifetime of the device.