

The Little Manual That Didn't Want to Be Read: A Technical Manual Critique





The weekend before this online course began, our portable home telephone decided to give up the ghost. After some research, we purchased a new phone system with a handset-to-handset intercom—which has proven instrumental for communicating within our four-story townhome:

AT&T Cordless Telephone System 2255

Despite this phone system's excellent features that I was excited to start using, the low readability of this manual had discouraged me from making the time to read it as soon as we bought the new phone system. Thankfully, this analysis assignment was the impetus to finally read the new user's manual. Along with this manual's strengths and weaknesses, you'll find some easy-to-implement suggestions for improvement.

Advantages

The user's manual of this phone system includes some very useful items.

- **Realistic illustrations.** Many illustrations help to guide you through tasks. Even though the illustrations are black-and-white, they are extremely clear and in the proper abstraction to highlight the feature or task being described.
- **Easy-to-follow procedures.** Except for the redial procedure, all the other procedures are accurate and appropriate for the task you wish to accomplish. In addition, they contain actual pictures of the buttons on a telephone handset such as , which you repeatedly press until the phone's message window displays the desired menu item, and , which you use to choose the desired menu item. The buttons' pictures increase readability by providing a break from the large amount of text crammed onto each page.
- **Helpful title page.** This page primarily contains a prominent illustration of the product, which easily identifies this manual if it's among other manuals in a drawer's file folder—especially since this manual's title is quite lengthy:

AT&T User's Manual: 2.4 GHz Dual Handset Cordless Telephone
Answering System 2255 with Caller ID/Call Waiting

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- **Readable table of contents.** The table of contents has bold, uppercase sans serif font for primary headings and then regular weight, titlecase serif font for secondary headings.
- **Web site.** Although this particular manual is not yet available online, you can find the Web site on the title page to obtain information such as ordering accessories.
- **Writing style.** This manual provides direct instructions written in the second person.

Disadvantages

However, the advantages are eclipsed by this manual's many problems.

- **Not a quick reference guide.** No index or other quick ways exist to locate a feature or solution to a problem. For example, to discover that this phone system allows you to send a call from one handset to the other, you have to either read the book cover-to-cover to discover this information or skim the table of contents to notice "Transferring a Call" under the Telephone Operation section.
- **Doesn't lie flat.** This manual is 30 pages that are 8 ½" high by 5 ½" wide. Secured by a center staple, it only wants to open to pages 14 and 15. This binding makes it difficult to page through this manual as well as keep it open to the page you desire to read.
- **Not enough white space.** Except for the illustrations, the page is almost entirely text. The white space border is only ¼" at the top and bottom of the pages and ½" at the left and right sides of the pages.
- **Contains a loose page.** A loose, single-sided sheet with "Important" emblazoned across the top discusses the significant features of the handset volume control, redial, and handset-in-use light on the base.
- **Has a broken cross-reference.** The title page suggests that you read Part 1—Important Product Information. However, this manual does not contain a section entitled "Part 1" or "Important Product Information."
- **Not very user-friendly troubleshooting.** Similar to attempting to locate your desired topic in the table of contents, you must read the FAQ-like entries in the "In Case of Difficulty" section until you find the solution that discusses your issue.

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Summary

Overall, this user's manual provides helpful information. Once you discover the feature's name that you want to investigate and then locate it in this manual, you can usually accomplish the desired task. Although it only took me a half an hour to read the entire manual, a few easy improvements to readability would be to include:

- More white space to invite the user to want to read this manual.
- A binder other than center staple to facilitate ease of use.
- An index to easily locate the appropriate section in this manual that addresses your situation.
- The fundamental information from the loose page and into the main manual. All the information should be in one manual.
- The correct instructions for redialing because the current procedure does not work.

The end