

Research Report

Multilingual Product Content:

Transforming Traditional
Practices to Global Content
Value Chains

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The Gilbane Group

Extract: Mercury Marine
Best Practices Profile



THE GILBANE GROUP

Mercury Marine

Mercury Marine is the world's leading manufacturer of recreational marine propulsion engines, providing engines, inflatable boats, service and parts for recreational, commercial and government marine applications. With over \$2 billion in annual sales, the company's global brand portfolio includes Mercury outboards, MerCruiser sterndrives and inboards, and MotorGuide products.



Founded in 1939, Mercury Marine is a division of Brunswick Corporation, a market leader in a number of recreational industries, including marine, fitness, bowling and billiards, with \$4.7 billion in revenue and over 20,000 employees.

Focus on Technical Documentation

Mercury Marine's technical communications department is the largest publisher in the Brunswick Corporation family. The team publishes a broad range of documents, including operations, installation, and service manuals, service bulletins, and instruction sheets. Most documents ship with the products; dealers receive service manuals and bulletins independently.

The technical communications department has a long and rich history of producing quality documentation, and is living evidence that organizations can continuously evolve to incorporate new technology and processes to advance product communications. The team simultaneously ships multilingual documentation that accompanies the introduction of new product updates and models. But it wasn't always this way...

Content Globalization Challenges

Early on, the manual production process was so labor intensive that it took two months to write and publish a single instruction sheet. Authors' hand-wrote the content and used a Polaroid camera to photograph the product. The art department managed typesetting, layout, and final photos. The publishing group printed the physical manuals.

The first stage in the evolution of technical communications was to prototype and later standardize on desktop publishing tools to automate much of the layout and publishing and provide greater creative capabilities. This foray into desktop publishing exceeded expectations for automation, but did not achieve the desired level of consistency for the department, instead becoming a "playground" for writers. In addition, the desktop publishing application was unable to readily publish in multiple languages.

In parallel, the costs for translation and desktop publishing continued to escalate each year, reaching nearly \$2 million annually. Mercury Marine was dissatisfied with the process and the results. Outsourcing translation and post-translation editing to a Language Service Provider (LSP) to leverage translation memory for reuse, Mercury Marine found they were unable to extract reuse levels from the provider.

Meanwhile, the team struggled with controlling consistency in the English source content, exacerbating publishing costs. Without the benefit of XML authoring or management technologies, they manually tracked content components as chunks, submitting only new content for translation.

When the technical communications team assumed responsibility for managing service manuals, they quickly realized that the existing process and technology infrastructure could not effectively scale to meet the demand. Operations manuals were generally about 125 pages in length. Customer service manuals were six times longer and sometimes extended to over 1,000 pages. The team knew they would need to improve and better automate how they managed and published content “chunks” before they could effectively manage and produce customer service manuals in multiple languages.

The Solution

Manager of Technical Communications, Gary Fenrich, was tasked with finding more effective and less costly alternatives for the preparation and publishing of multilingual product documentation. Fenrich brought in a Systems Integrator (SI) who conducted an investigation of product communications processes. The SI made recommendations and developed a plan for how Mercury Marine could advance technical communications through a combination of XML-based structured authoring, component content management (CCM), and more automated, streamlined translation and publishing.

To acquire and implement this new technology infrastructure would be expensive and require dramatic changes to how Mercury Marine managed people, process, and technology. Underscoring the potential impact to productivity and time to market, the SI recommended fundamental change management processes.

The first step in this endeavor would be to make a successful business case to senior management, one that demonstrated greater control of costs, resources, and translation processes to deliver a substantial business return. Translation costs were at the core of the business case: if an owner’s manual or customer service manual changed only 10%, then the translation costs should only be 10% more.

Although the team presented two business cases for custom SGML solutions to senior management, both were rejected due to high costs. With the help of the SI, they identified a new XML-based solution that included:

- A commercial CCM solution from Vasont Systems that would help contain costs and avoid the trappings of custom software (which require a level of support that can be protracted and expensive.)
- A structured authoring application.
- The introduction of a new LSP that fully embraced Mercury Marine’s new approach and help the technical communications team gain control of translation assets while containing costs.

- An automated, multi-channel publishing system.

This time, senior management approved the proposal on the condition that it would deliver a positive ROI within a year, and reduce the internal headcount and external costs for translation and post-translation processing.

As an operational champion, Fenrich was fully aware of the challenge in orchestrating change management across the company to meet these goals. Implementing the solution required new skill sets and cross-departmental processes, requiring several related efforts:

- Establish consistent collaboration and alignment with executives at the director and VP levels.
- Establish a multinational, cross-departmental team with reliance on the regional, in-country management who were responsible for local market success and owned much of the translation budgets.
- Secure additional in-house technical resources to guide and assist in the implementation. Knowing from the outset that corporate IT could not provide sufficient resources, Fenrich added a computer science professional to the team.
- Establish new process, guidance, and roles for a successful adoption of structured authoring. As Fenrich stated, “The goal was to get the writers to think about writing for publishing. Instead of writing for a book, they would need to write for the content database and for discrete processes.” Enlisting the help of a lead technical writer on the team, Fenrich created a new role with responsibility for XML authoring guidelines, team leadership during implementation, and solution testing.

Results

Mercury Marine achieved the ROI and headcount reduction goals in just 8 months. Today, content reuse for both source and translated content is high, as much as 90% for existing operations manuals, and 50% for new manuals. On an annual basis, Mercury now supports documentation in up to 23 languages, including:

- 50 owner’s guides
- 30 service manuals (each between 600 and 1,000 pages)
- 200 technical bulletins
- 600 instruction sheets

With infrastructure and cross-departmental processes in place, Fenrich has moved the focus to the accuracy and quality of source content stating, “It’s all about clean – clean English source and clean translated content.” With glossaries in place to support all languages, the approval process for localization/ translation is closely monitored, as once translated text is checked into Vasont, it becomes available for reuse. “We were lucky,” remarked Fenrich, “in that Vasont’s tagging and workflow made it simple to track, express multilingual equivalents, manage, and reuse text in all languages.”

Summarizing the journey, Fenrich remarked: “In snowy Wisconsin where our headquarters is, you’re always following the snowplow. To move forward in technical communications, we needed to own, drive, and maintain ‘our snowplow.’ So that’s what we did.”

Gilbane Group Perspective

Mercury Marine has a globalization strategy that drives the continuous improvement and evolution of product communications. What is most striking is the high level of maturity within various processes, characterized by a spirit of teamwork and individual contribution. Mercury actively shares language assets in both the source and target languages. There are no product content silos. Collaboration pervades the company, particularly evident in how different departments are individually competent yet work closely together. As Fenrich noted, “We needed a team effort, not just a mandate, to get the job done.” This approach is distinguished by:

- A high level of centralized and regional balance that includes language decision making.
- Streamlined globalization processes and workflow across different company functions
- Well-enforced corporate style guide to ensure content consistency
- Established practices for tracking the reuse of multilingual content

Mercury is also quite mature in the competency of its subject matter experts (SMEs) and approach to resource management. With multiple operational champions and key executive sponsors in place, the company has achieved vertical and horizontal alignment across the Services organization, along with consistent functional interaction and engagement.

A solid, XML-based technology foundation serves the team well, incorporating structured authoring, Component Content Management, translation memory and LSP-driven workflow software, and multichannel publishing software. These solutions are effectively integrated and linked to technical communications’ processes.