

Consumer Feelings About Product Documentation

How your customers feel about the instructions your company provides

2012 and 2013

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Summary

For the last two years, I've run an opinion poll asking what consumers think about the instructions they get with the products they purchase.

For 2013, the results are not that different from 2012, although the data set was almost twice as large (216 vs 423).

This opinion poll was directed at understanding the myth in product development and marketing that "No one reads the manual". In fact, the results of this poll show that not only do people read the manual ([Question 4](#)), clear and helpful product instructions are a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Consumers rated product instructions overall as sometimes helpful ([Question 5](#)). Clearly more work needs to be done developing more useful product instructions.

Unclear and confusing product instructions make consumers angry, ([Question 11](#)) throw doubt on the quality of the rest of the product ([Question 7](#)), and impacts further purchases from the company ([Question 10](#)). Additionally, consumers regret purchasing a product if the instructions are incomplete or confusing ([Question 12](#)).

This year, I asked 3 new questions about price and quality of product instructions ([Question 14](#), [Question 15](#), and [Question 16](#)). While these questions need to be refined in future polls, the more expensive the product, the higher the expectation of the product instructions. And the price point for those higher expectations is about \$25, far less than most consumer products that require instructions.

If the product is a commodity, in that there are other products that do similar things for a similar price, consumers will return a product they cannot figure out and purchase from a competitor. While not asked in this poll, in the world of social media, it is assumed that this decision is shared on the social media outlets.

On the other hand, clear and useful product instructions support and improve the brand, as consumers feel the company cares about them and their ability to use the products. This question was asked directly ([Question 9](#)) and the comments for almost all questions support this feeling.

Consumers want to use the product instruction to use the products they purchase. If the manufacturer provides clear and useful product instructions, this is a competitive advantage. I would go so far as to say this is a good marketing message to distinguish commodity products from the competition.

If you are not developing commodity products, the take away message is still clear: your customers are using the product instructions to use your products. Their expectations of the quality of these instructions are low but your customers notice and want clear and useful instructions. You can meet or exceed your customer expectations by investing in clear and useful product instructions.

Overview

In the world of product development and marketing, we have a myth that “no one reads the product documents”. Inherent to this assumption is that product instructions are not important and can be ignored, as they are of no value.

I decided to challenge this myth to see how consumers feel about the instructions that come with the products they buy. Do consumers value clear and useable product documentation? When do they use product documentation? Do consumers want clear and useful instructions? What are their expectations of product instructions and how do they feel about using them? What do consumers think about companies that do not provide clear and useful instructions?

The questions were meant to find out these feelings.

This was an opinion poll and is not meant to take the place of ethnographic or observational research into whether or not what people are reporting is factually true. I wanted to get to what people thought and what they report doing. However, some of these results jibe with research I’m aware of about how people use product instructions.

General Analysis

This section presents and discusses each question in order. I am only looking at data for the respondents who completed the poll each year. Additionally, when the data is sorted and cross cut into various groupings, no new pictures emerged; therefore, there is no discussion of subsets of cross-cutting data.

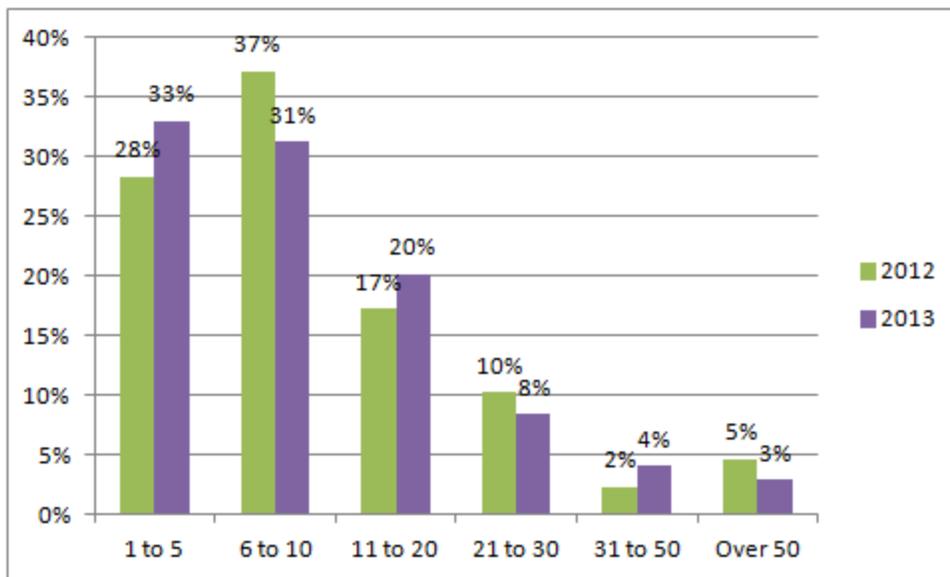
To see the complete and detailed discussion of questions, see the ebook, available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Questions

This section covers each question for both years . Each question is listed with a table and a chart, showing the answers.

Question 1

In the last 12 months, estimate how many products you or your household bought that came with instructions? (choose 1)



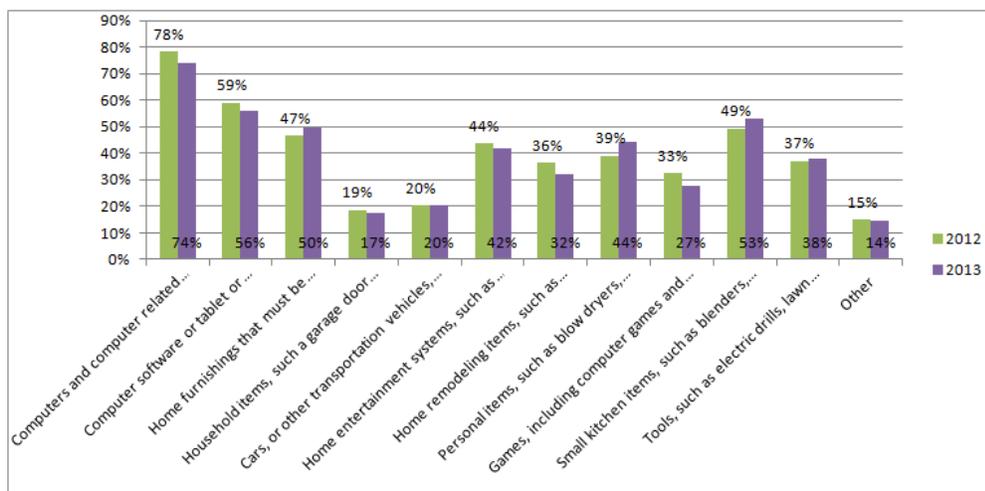
Most households estimate they purchased 1 to 10 items that came with instructions in the last year.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 2

What kinds of products did you or your household purchase that came with instructions?
(Chose all that apply)

Option	2012	2013
Cars, or other transportation vehicles, such as jet skis or off-road vehicles	20%	20%
Computer software or tablet or smartphone apps	59%	56%
Computers and computer related products, such as tablets or smart phones	78%	74%
Games, including computer games and board games	33%	27%
Home entertainment systems, such as TVs, game devices, or remote controls	44%	42%
Home furnishings that must be assembled, such as bookcases, desks, or patio furniture	47%	50%
Home remodeling items, such as faucets, dishwashers, or heat/AC controllers	36%	32%
Household items, such a garage door openers or home alarm systems	19%	17%
Other	15%	14%
Personal items, such as blow dryers, electric shavers, or heat-ing pads	39%	44%
Small kitchen items, such as blenders, bread makers, or food processors	49%	53%
Tools, such as electric drills, lawn mowers, or trimmers	37%	38%



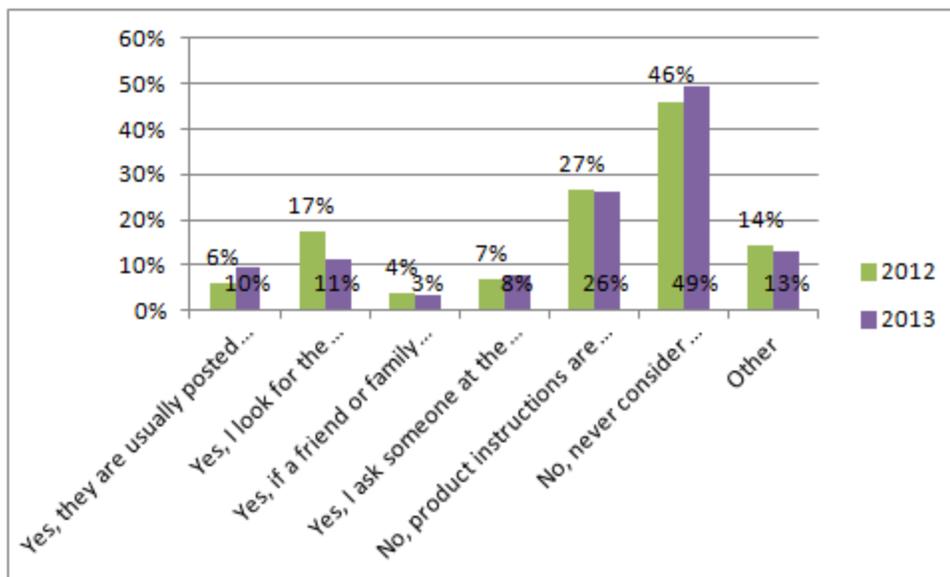
Most households report purchasing computers, computer related items, and applications to run on these devices.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Question 3

Do you typically look at the product instructions before you buy a product? (Choose all that apply)

Option	2012	2013
Yes, they are usually posted right by the product	6%	10%
Yes, I look for the instructions on the web before I buy	17%	11%
Yes, if a friend or family member has the product	4%	3%
Yes, I ask someone at the store or I look them up online	7%	8%
No, product instructions are not available to me	27%	26%
No, never consider instructions when I buy a product	46%	49%
Other	14%	13%



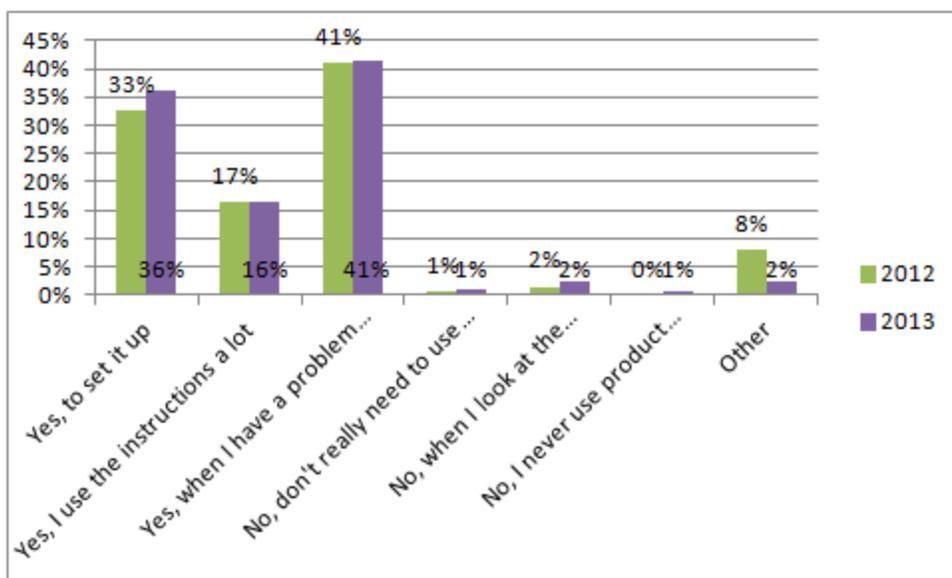
Most people don't consider product instructions before they purchase a product.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 4

Do you typically use the product instructions as you use a product? (choose 1)

Option	2012	2013
Yes, to set it up	33%	36%
Yes, I use the instructions a lot	17%	16%
Yes, when I have a problem or can't figure something out on my own	41%	41%
No, don't really need to use the instructions	1%	1%
No, when I look at the instructions, they aren't usually helpful	2%	2%
No, I never use product instructions	0%	1%
Other	8%	2%

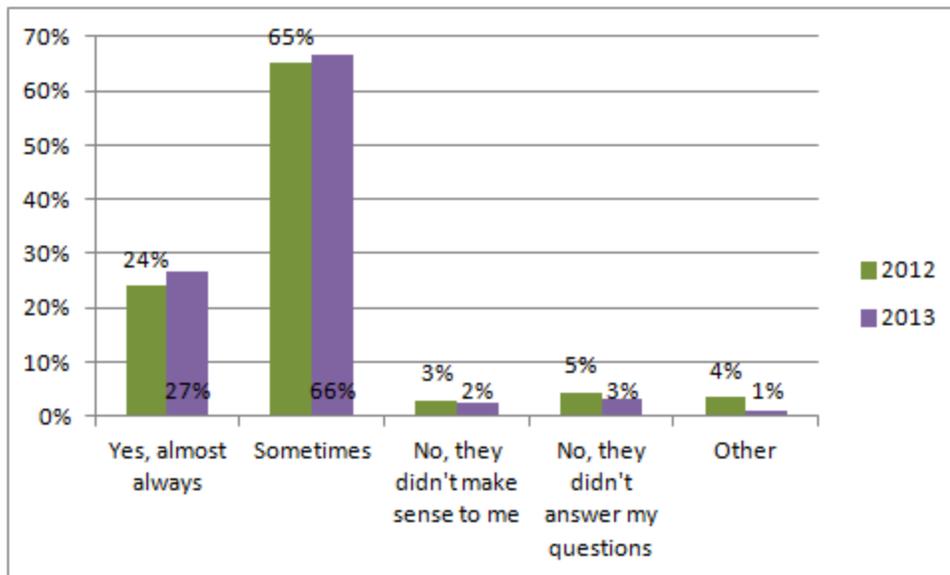


To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 5

Thinking about products you recently purchased, were the product instructions helpful, in that they contained the information you needed in a way that made sense to you? (Choose 1)

Option	2012	2013
Yes, almost always	24%	27%
Sometimes	65%	66%
No, they didn't make sense to me	3%	2%
No, they didn't answer my questions	5%	3%
Other	4%	1%



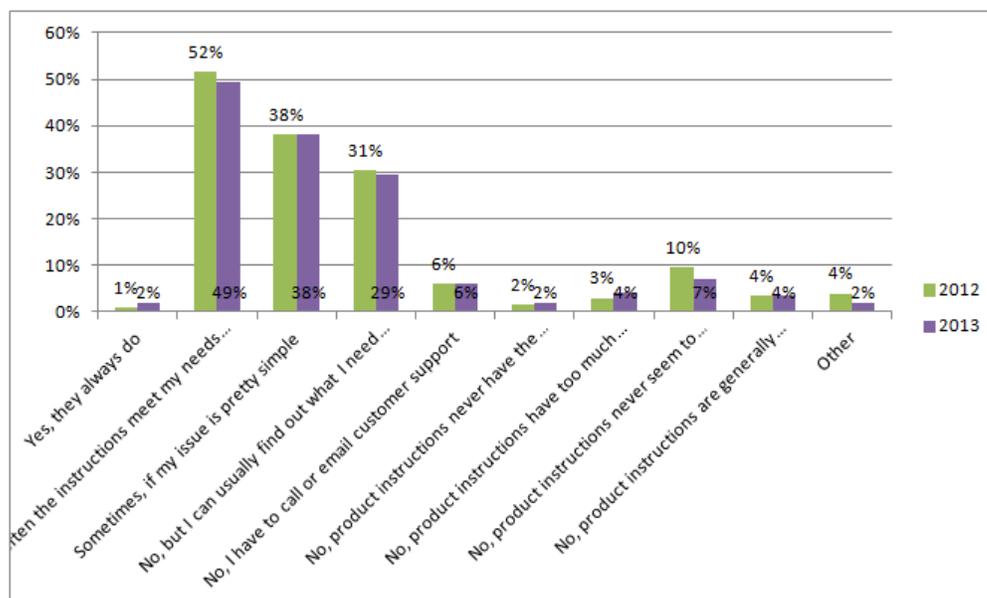
~65% said that sometimes product instructions make sense.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 6

Overall, do you feel the instructions provided with products you buy meet your needs?
(Choose all that apply)

Option	2012	2013
Yes, they always do	1%	2%
Yes, often the instructions meet my needs but not always	51%	49%
Sometimes, if my issue is pretty simple	39%	38%
No, but I can usually find out what I need from other sources, like a friend, family member, or a web search	31%	29%
No, I have to call or email customer support	6%	6%
No, product instructions never have the right information	2%	2%
No, product instructions have too much detail or technical jargon	3%	4%
No, product instructions never seem to answer my specific question	10%	7%
No, product instructions are generally useless	4%	4%
Other	4%	2%



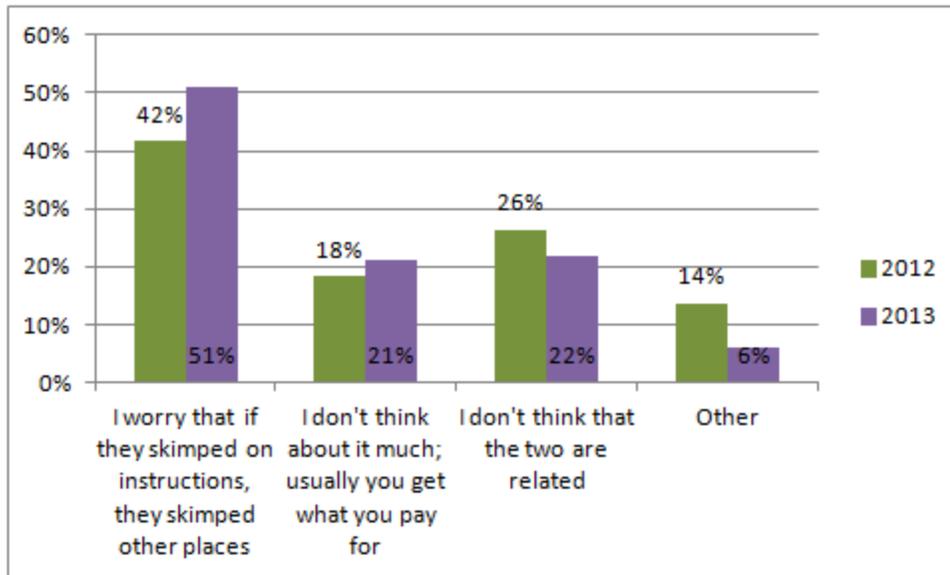
~51% report that the instructions "Often" make sense.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 7

If the product instructions are confusing or incomplete, how do you feel about the overall quality of the product?

Option	2012	2013
I worry that if they skimmed on instructions, they skimmed other places	42%	51%
I don't think about it much; usually you get what you pay for	18%	21%
I don't think that the two are related	26%	22%
Other	14%	6%



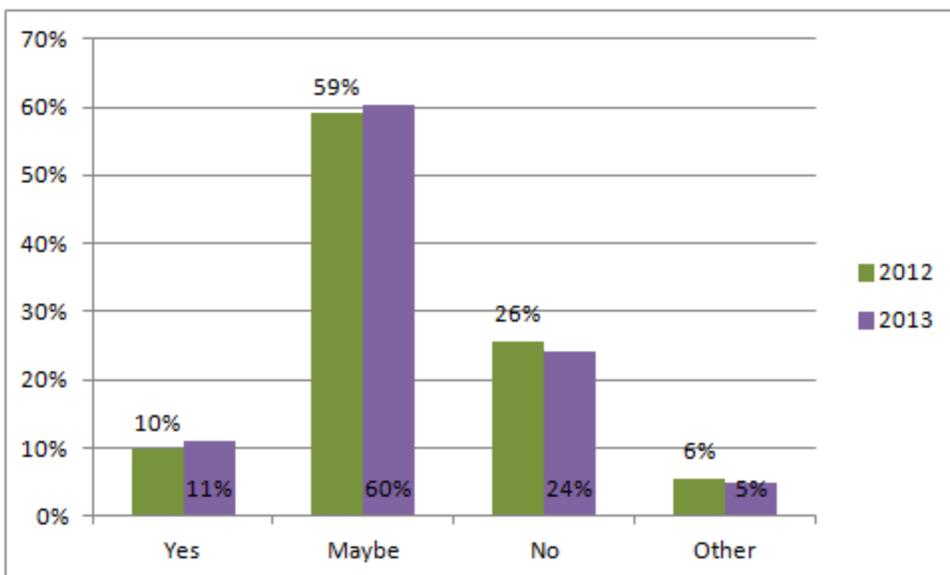
Nearly half said they are concerned about the overall quality of the product, if the instructions are confusing or incomplete.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 8

If the product instructions seem incomplete, do you feel confident about using the product?

Option	2012	2013
Yes	10%	11%
Maybe	59%	60%
No	26%	24%
Other	6%	5%



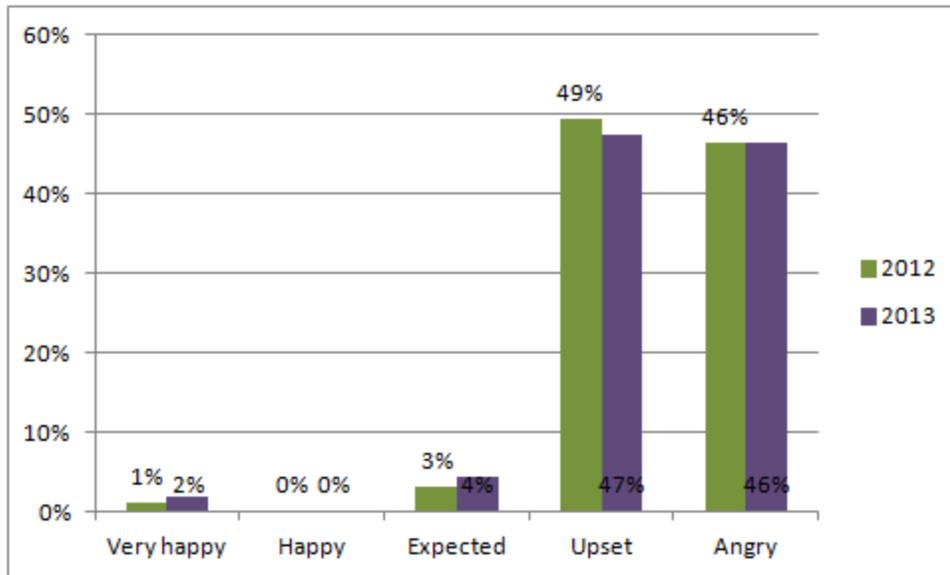
If the product instructions are incomplete, 44% feel less than confident about using the product in general.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 9

Thinking about products you recently bought, what do you feel clear instructions say about the company?

Option	2012	2013
The company cares about me and my ability to use their product	69%	71%
The company doesn't care about me and my ability to use their product	9%	8%
Companies don't care about me one way or the other	9%	10%
Other	13%	10%



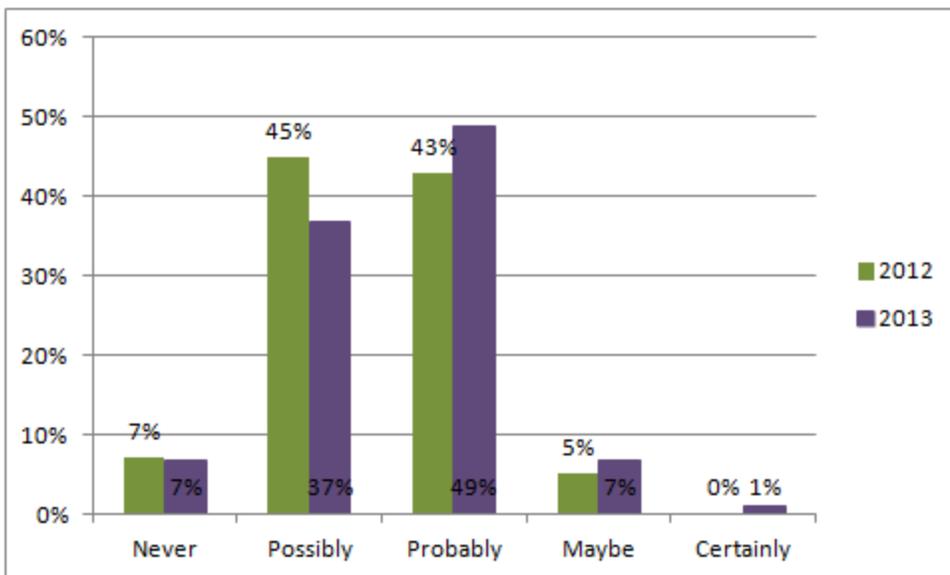
Poor instructions means the company that produced the instructions doesn't care about the consumer. That's the message our customers are getting when they can't figure out the product instructions.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 10

If the product instructions are confusing or incomplete, how likely are you to buy from that company again?

	Never	Possibly	Maybe	Probably	Certainly
2012	7%	37%	49%	6%	1%
2013	7%	45%	43%	5%	0%



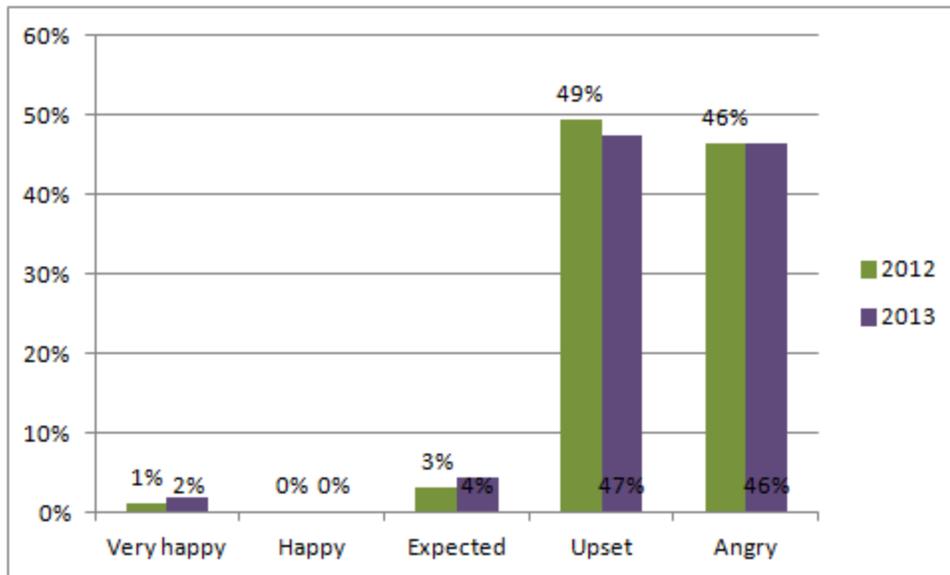
To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

The product may have been rushed to market. It kind of depends on my total experience with that company. If I see a trend, I start avoiding them.

Question 11

How does it make you feel if you buy a product and you can't figure out how to use it?

	Very Happy	Happy	Expected	Upset	Angry
2012	2%	0%	3%	49%	46%
2013	1%	0%	4%	47%	46%



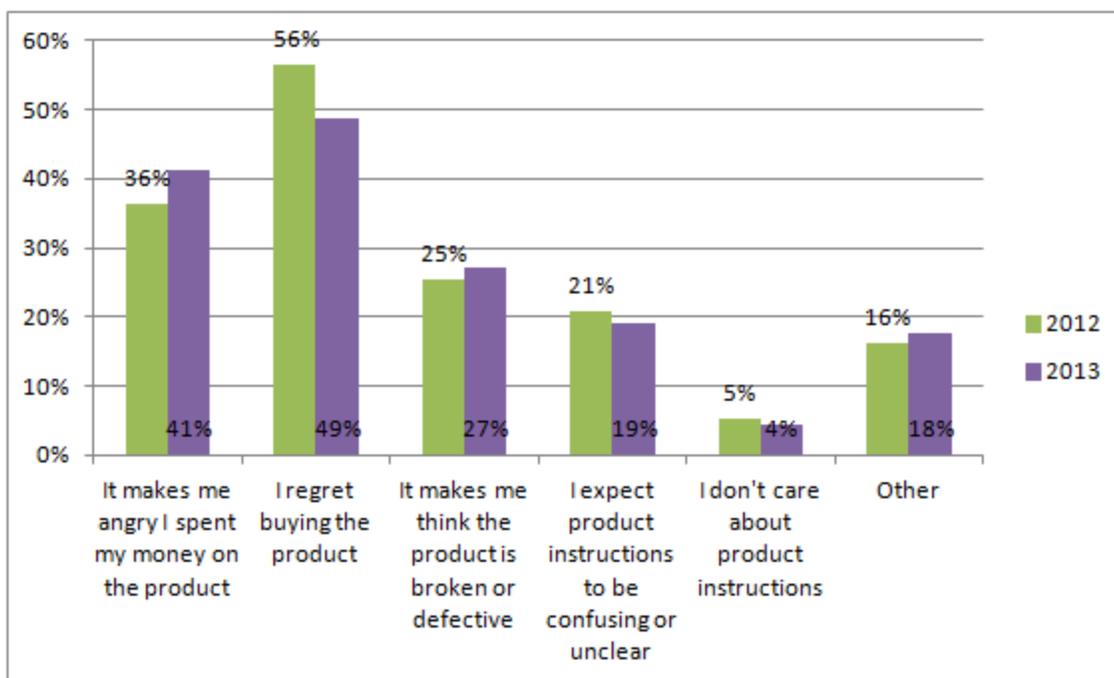
Not being able to understand how to use a product makes ~48% of the respondents upset, followed closely by actual anger (46%), giving us 95% of respondents as generally upset and angry. I think the percentage who responded as "Very Happy" were being sarcastic.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 12

If the instructions are confusing or incomplete, how does that make you feel about the products you buy? (Choose all that apply)

Option	2012	2013
It makes me angry I spent my money on the product	36%	41%
I regret buying the product	56%	49%
It makes me think the product is broken or defective	25%	27%
I expect product instructions to be confusing or unclear	21%	19%
I don't care about product instructions	5%	4%
Other	16%	18%



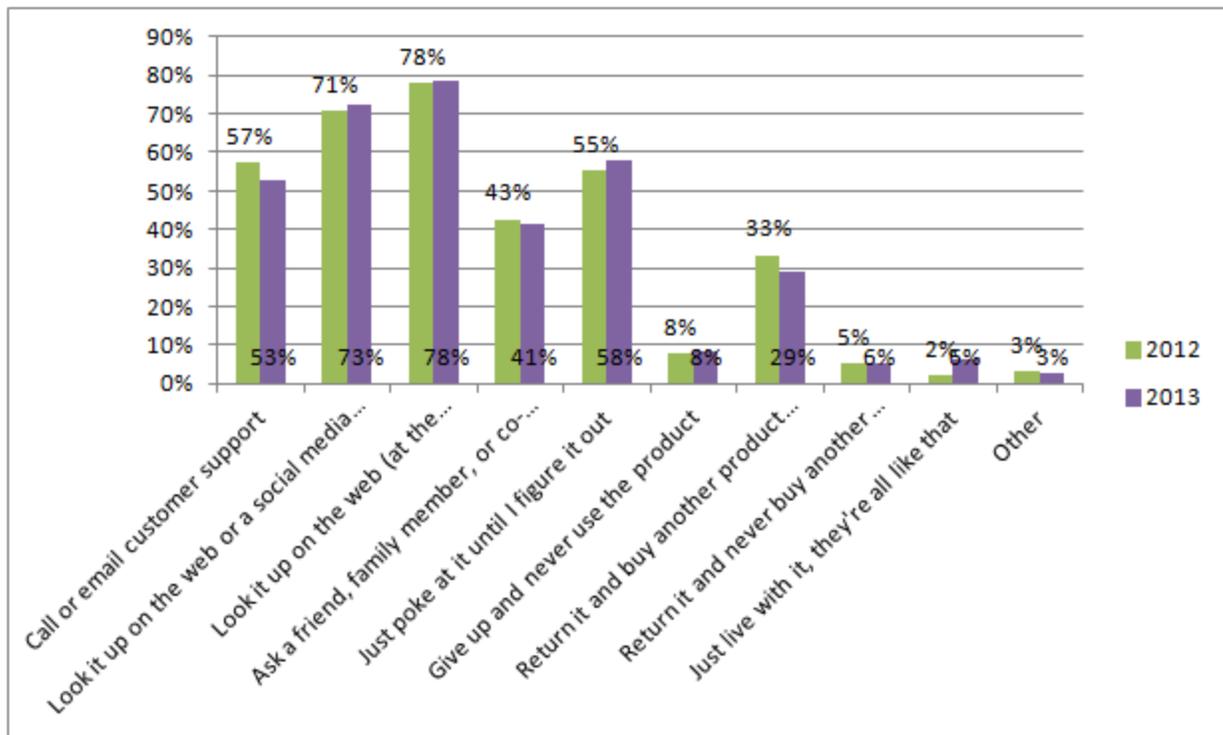
If the product instructions are confusing or incomplete, respondents regret purchasing the product and get angry.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 13

If you can't figure out how to use a product, what do you do next? (Choose all that apply)

Option	2012	2013
Call or email customer support	57%	53%
Look it up on the web or a social media site (not at the manufacturer site)	71%	73%
Look it up on the web (at the manufacturer site)	78%	78%
Ask a friend, family member, or co-worker for help	43%	41%
Just poke at it until I figure it out	55%	58%
Give up and never use the product	8%	8%
Return it and buy another product from a different company	33%	29%
Return it and never buy another product like that again	5%	6%
Just live with it, they're all like that	2%	6%
Other	3%	3%



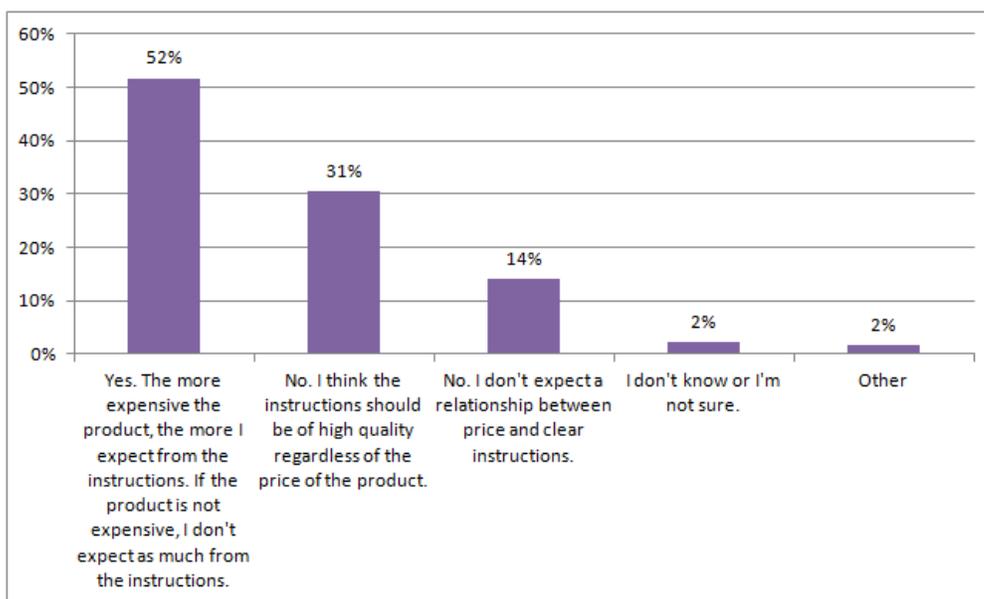
When in doubt, the first thing respondents report doing is going to the manufacturer's site (78%).

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 14

Think about the price you pay for a product. Does the price of the product influence your feelings about the quality of the instructions?

Option	Response
Yes. The more expensive the product, the more I expect from the instructions. If the product is not expensive, I don't expect as much from the instructions.	52%
No. I think the instructions should be of high quality regardless of the price of the product.	31%
No. I don't expect a relationship between price and clear instructions.	14%
I don't know or I'm not sure.	2%
Other	2%

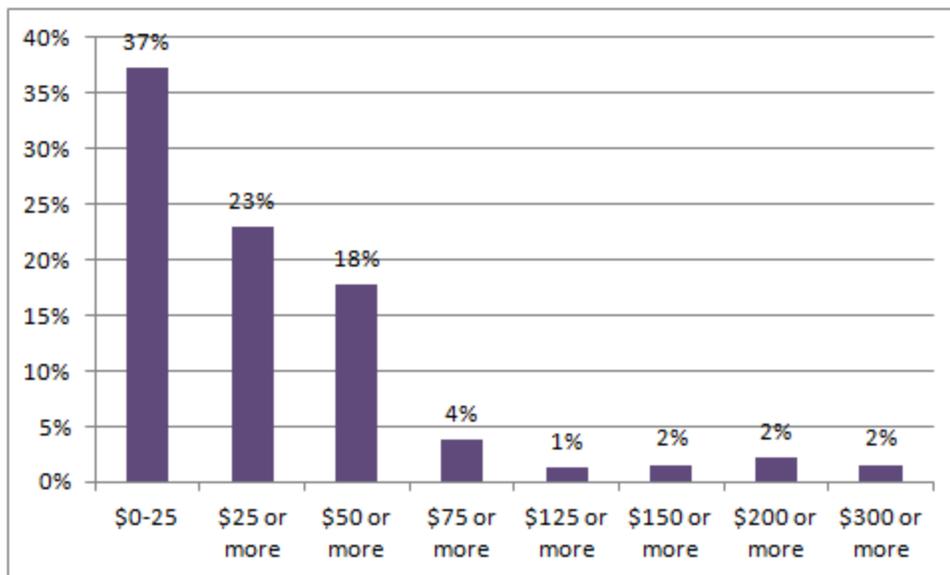


To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Question 15

Think about the cost of a product and the product instructions included with it. When you purchase a product, what is the minimum purchase price at which you expect clear and helpful instructions, in general?

Price	2013
\$0-25	37%
\$25 or more	23%
\$50 or more	18%
\$75 or more	4%
\$100 or more	1%
\$125 or more	2%
\$150 or more	2%
\$200 or more	2%
\$300 or more	2%

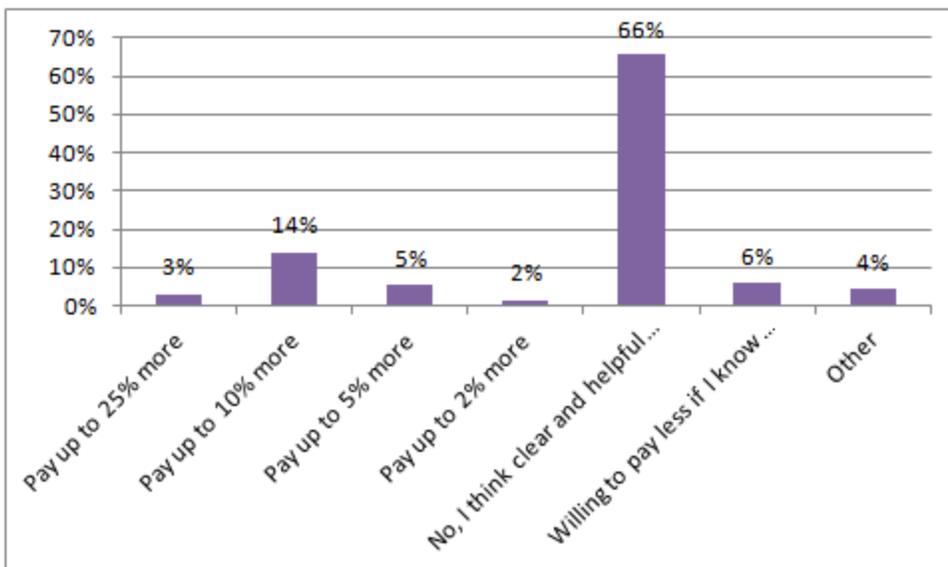


To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 16

Are you willing to pay more for a product if you know the instructions are clear and helpful?

Option	2013
Pay up to 25% more	3%
Pay up to 10% more	14%
Pay up to 5% more	5%
Pay up to 2% more	2%
No, I think clear and helpful instructions should be included in the price of the product	66%
Willing to pay less if I know the product instructions are unhelpful or the product doesn't have any instructions	6%
Other	4%



To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

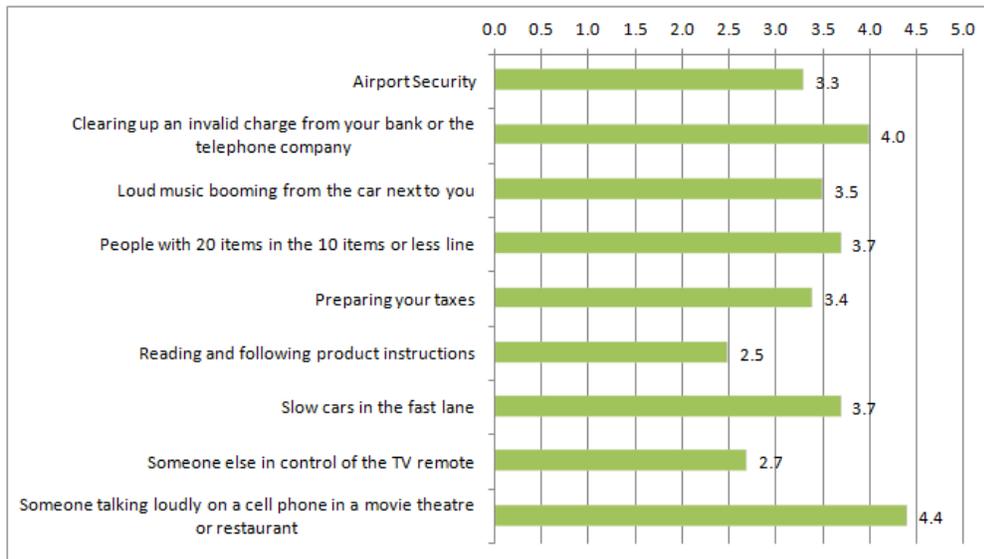
Question 17 (Old 14)

Rank the following:

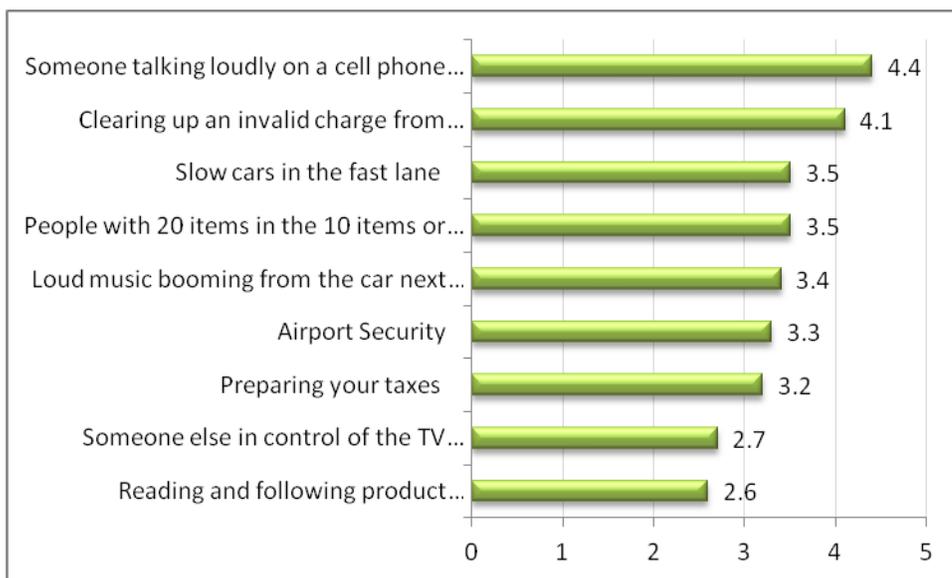
1 = Not annoying , 2 = Sometimes annoying , 3 = Neutral , 4 = Annoying , 5 = Very annoying

- Airport Security
- Clearing up an invalid charge from your bank or the telephone company
- Loud music booming from the car next to you
- People with 20 items in the 10 items or less line
- Preparing your taxes
- Reading and following product instructions
- Slow cars in the fast lane
- Someone else in control of the TV remote
- Someone talking loudly on a cell phone in a movie theatre or restaurant

2013



2012



Of these activities, in both years, people rate reading and following product instructions as the least annoying.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

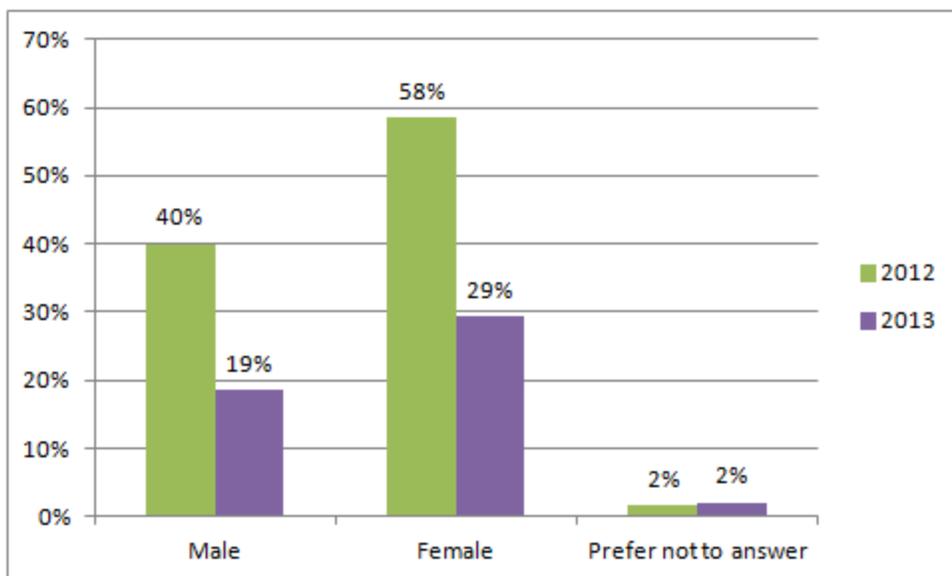
Question 18 (Old 15)

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about product instructions? (Do not provide your contact information or other means of identifying you personally.)

Question 19 (Old 16)

What is your gender (optional)

Option	2012	2013
Male	40%	19%
Female	58%	29%
Prefer not to answer	2%	2%

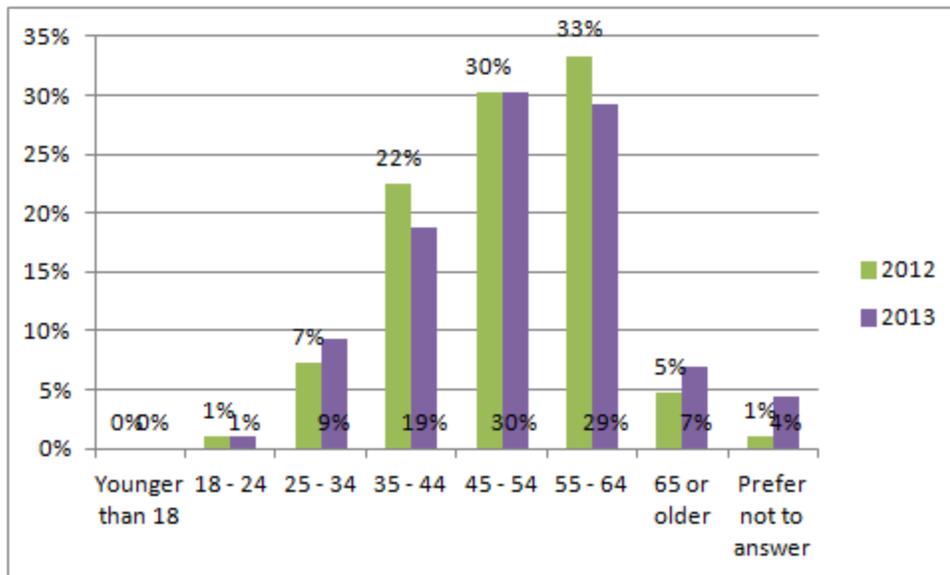


More women than men identified themselves. Not everyone answered this question.

Question 20 (Old 17)

Which category describes your age? (optional)

Option	2012	2013
Younger than 18	0%	0%
18 - 24	1%	1%
25 - 34	7%	9%
35 - 44	22%	19%
45 - 54	30%	30%
55 - 64	33%	29%
65 or older	5%	7%
Prefer not to answer	1%	4%

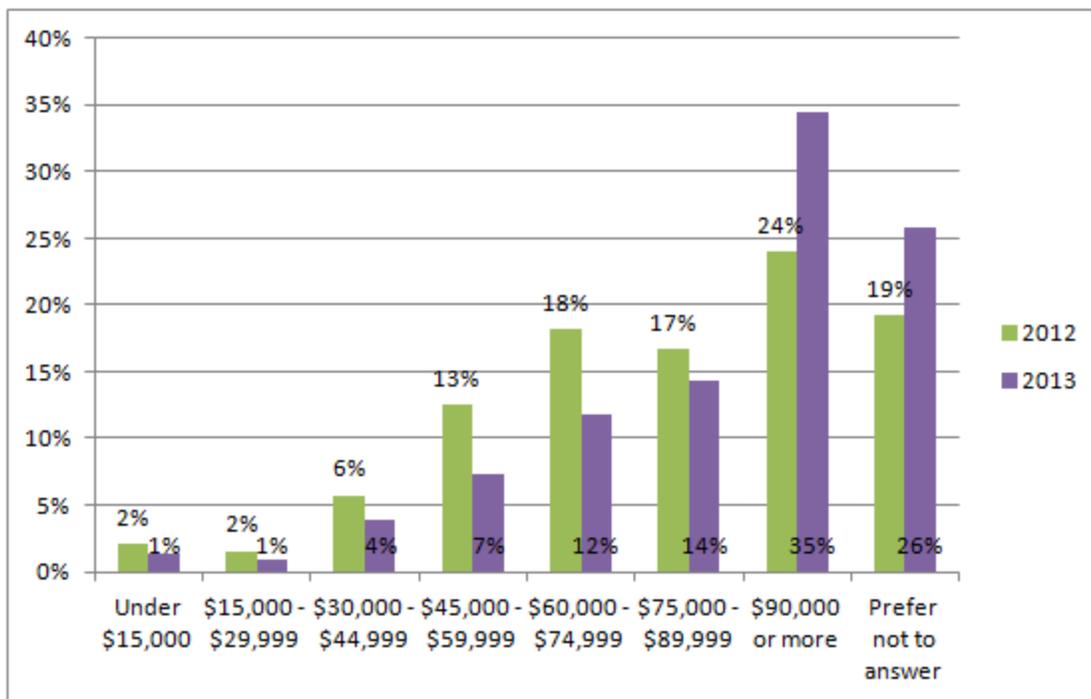


The age demographics skew towards slightly older. This poll may not represent the opinions of the under 34 age groups.

Question 21 (Old 18)

Which category best describes your annual income? (optional)

Option	2012	2013
Under \$15,000	2%	1%
\$15,000 - \$29,999	2%	1%
\$30,000 - \$44,999	6%	4%
\$45,000 - \$59,999	13%	7%
\$60,000 - \$74,999	18%	12%
\$75,000 - \$89,999	17%	14%
\$90,000 or more	24%	35%
Prefer not to answer	19%	26%



This poll skews towards those who make more than the median US household income and may not reflect the opinions of the average US household.

Because of the international nature of this poll, it was not expected that these numbers would reflect a US average.

General Discussion and Future Research

I set out in 2012 to discover if people use the instructions that come with the product they purchase and if so, are the instructions meeting their needs. Repeating the poll in 2013 simply reinforced the data and the conclusion.

It's clear that the myth that no one uses the product documentation is factually wrong. People do use the product instructions when setting up the product and when they encounter a problem. What this tells us is that people are counting on the product instructions to help them get started and to get them out of trouble.

Sadly, the product instructions are only meeting the customer needs "sometimes". The comments are especially interesting for this question and include the following:

- *I feel that I won't be using it correctly, or as intended, that I am having to use a workaround to use it which isn't utilizing its full potential*
- *I know they just want to engineer, manufacture, and sell; they don't want to bother with explaining in a consumer-friendly way.*
- *I feel confident in my ability to always find a solution. What I definitely didn't NOT feel confident about is my intention to purchase anything else from the company.*
- *Customer service is so easy these days, even if it's sending an e-mail. Why spend frustrating minutes trying something that may or may not be there when you can contact customer service?*

The reasons product instructions are only sometimes helpful are clear:

- too much focus on what the products does, not enough focus on how to accomplish tasks
- poorly written or confusing steps
- incomplete information

And the results of unclear and confusing product instructions are rather devastating. People:

- worry if the instructions are confusing or incomplete, the overall quality of the product is low
- don't feel confident using the product
- regret purchasing the product
- are upset or angry about the purchase
- don't want to purchase from that company again.

These consumer feelings about product instructions are important to us, as they go to ease of use of products. If the customer can't use the product, our efforts at creating the product go to waste. Additionally, every time customers contact support because they couldn't find what they needed in the product instructions, this costs the company money. Worse, if the consumer decides the product is too difficult to use, they return it, adding return costs to the company.

Additionally, we learned that while the picture is a little complicated, people expect clear instructions with products they buy. Price of the product is not really a factor, after about \$25. Most consumer products that require instructions are priced over that mark.

While I didn't ask about social media use and expressing negative feelings about incomplete and confusing instructions, I think we can all be assured that these unhappy consumers are sharing their thought about our products on social media. Can our brands afford that negative sentiment in a highly connected world?

The good news out of this survey is in [Question 9](#), if a company produces clear and useful product instructions, it communicates that the company cares about the consumer. The message here is clear, if you want to build brand loyalty and make your customers happy, provide clear and complete product instructions.

As one of the respondents said:

I'm angry and frustrated. I feel demeaned by the company, as if they're saying "Ha, ha! Gotcha! Made ya buy it! We don't care whether you can use it or not. We've got your money!"

