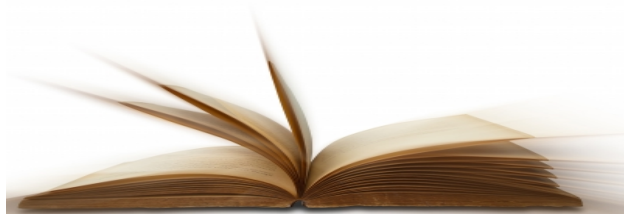


Consumer Feelings About Product Documentation

How your customers feel about the instructions your company provides

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Summary

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](#)).

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 other hand, clear and useful product instructions 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.

Methods

The opinion poll was created in and hosted by ConstantContact.com, providing me easy access to both the poll and my database of contacts in one tool. Respondants were not tracked, in that personal information about them was not collected or tracked. However, to prevent one person from completing the poll multiple times, ConstantContact did drop a cookie to prevent multiple submissions from the same IP address.

The opinion poll ran from 1 April 2012 to June 30 2012 and was available internationally to anyone who wanted to respond on the website. Invitations to the survey were sent out through multiple channels, including Twitter, Facebook, Constant Contact emails to over 1000 people, and to several Internet discussion forums. I know the links were further socialized after I published them.

269 people started the poll and 192 completed it in the time period it was available.

Nearly all questions were required. Nearly all questions allowed for comments to be made and comments *were* made. The poll topic is one that seemed to engender comments. Some questions allowed more than one answer. These are noted in the discussion.

Where the question asked to rank several options, these options were randomized in the survey. As each person got to that question, the software automatically randomly reordered the options. This helps to prevent any option from being selected simply because of its position in a list. [Question 2](#) is an example of this.

While I asked basic demographic questions, these were entirely optional, as I didn't want to make this a barrier for gathering data. Some people are uncomfortable identifying this information, even when they are not being tracked.

Poll instructions and definitions

The survey included the following instructions defining the phrase “product instruction”:

In this opinion poll, we'd like to know your feelings about product instructions and how you use the instructions that come with the products you buy. For this poll, when we say product instructions, we mean:

- *instruction manuals or assembly sheets included in the product packaging, like a hair dryer, furniture you assemble, kitchen appliances, home entertainment systems, or other products you buy*
- *instructions that appear on a screen, like in a software product or a product like a cell phone,*
- *any other instructions provided by the manufacturer of the product*

General Analysis

This section presents and discusses each question in order. I am only looking at data for the 192 respondents who completed the poll. 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.

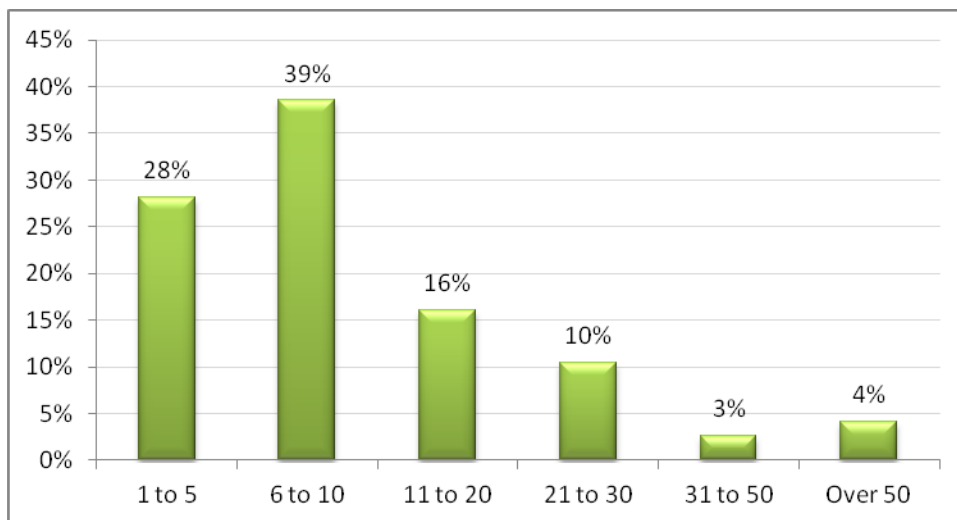
To see the complete and detailed discussion of questions, see the ebook, available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Questions

This section covers each question. 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)



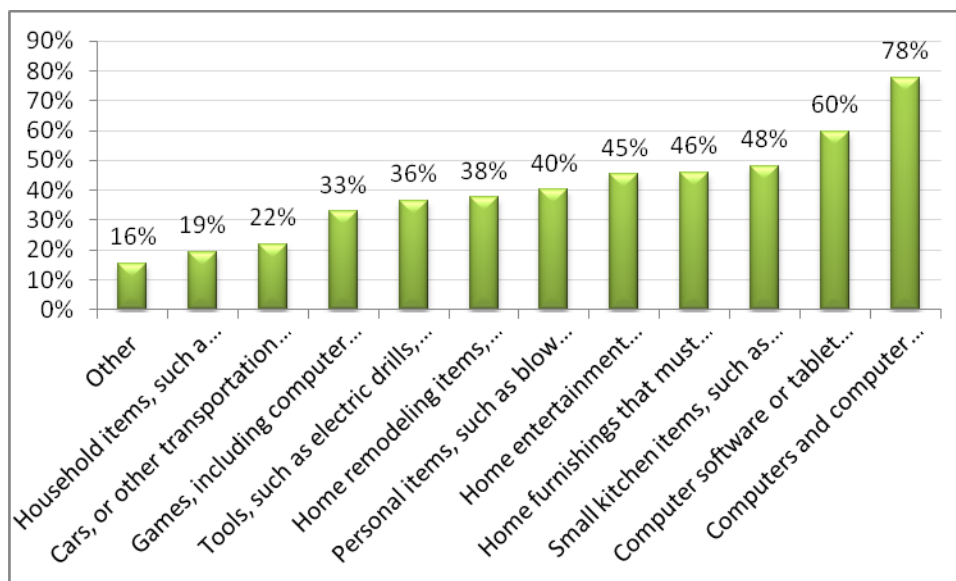
Most households (67%) estimate they purchased 1 to 10 items that came with instructions in the last year.

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

Question 2

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

Option	Response
Other	16%
Household items, such a garage door openers or home alarm systems	19%
Cars, or other transportation vehicles, such as jet skis or off-road vehicles	22%
Games, including computer games and board games	33%
Tools, such as electric drills, lawn mowers, or trimmers	36%
Home remodeling items, such as faucets, dishwashers, or heat/AC controllers	38%
Personal items, such as blow dryers, electric shavers, or heating pads	40%
Home entertainment systems, such as TVs, game devices, or remote controls	45%
Home furnishings that must be assembled, such as bookcases, desks, or patio furniture	46%
Small kitchen items, such as blenders, bread makers, or food processors	48%
Computer software or tablet or smartphone apps	60%
Computers and computer related products, such as tablets or smart phones	78%



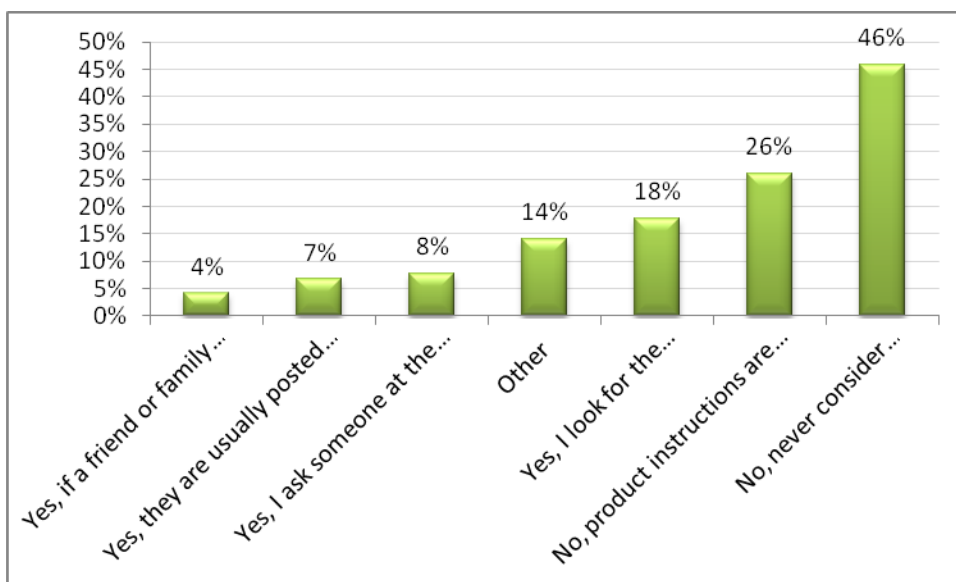
Most households report purchasing computers, computer related items, and applications to run on these devices.

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

Question 3

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

Option	Response
Yes, if a friend or family member has the product	4%
Yes, they are usually posted right by the product	7%
Yes, I ask someone at the store or I look them up online	8%
Other	14%
Yes, I look for the instructions on the web before I buy	18%
No, product instructions are not available to me	26%
No, never consider instructions when I buy a product	46%



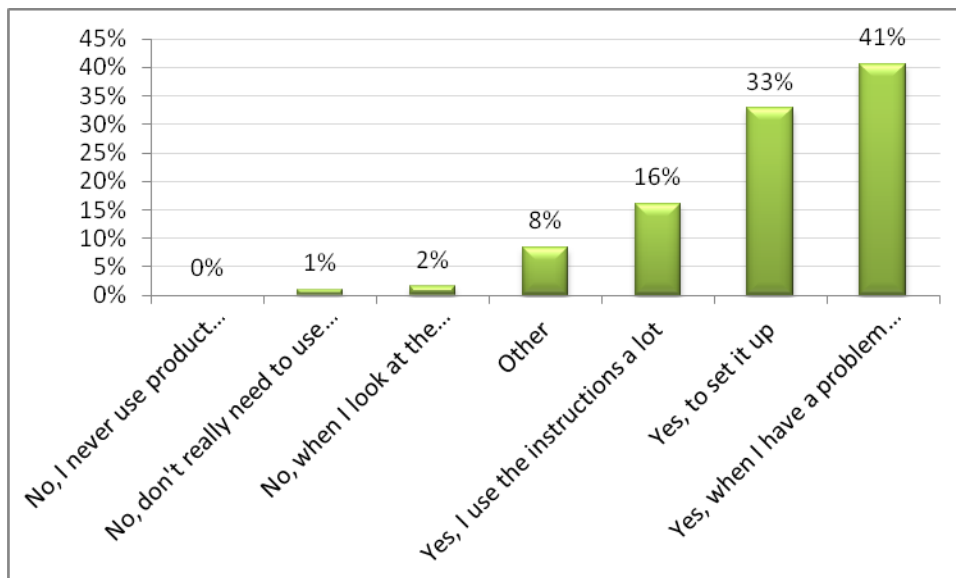
Most people don't consider product instructions before they purchase a product.

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

Question 4

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

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



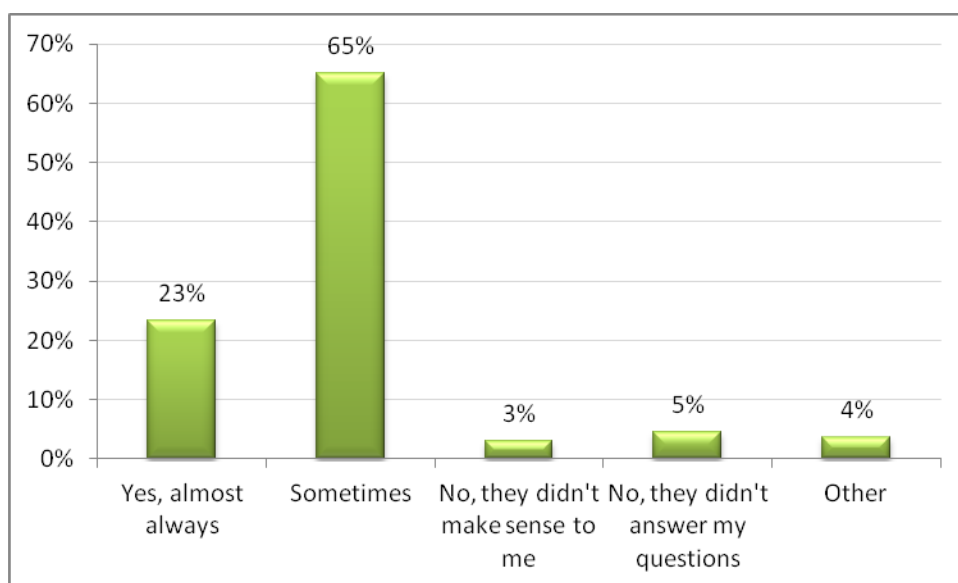
41% say they use the instructions when they have a problem, while 33% use instructions to set up the product.

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	Response
Yes, almost always	23%
Sometimes	65%
No, they didn't make sense to me	3%
No, they didn't answer my questions	5%
Other	4%



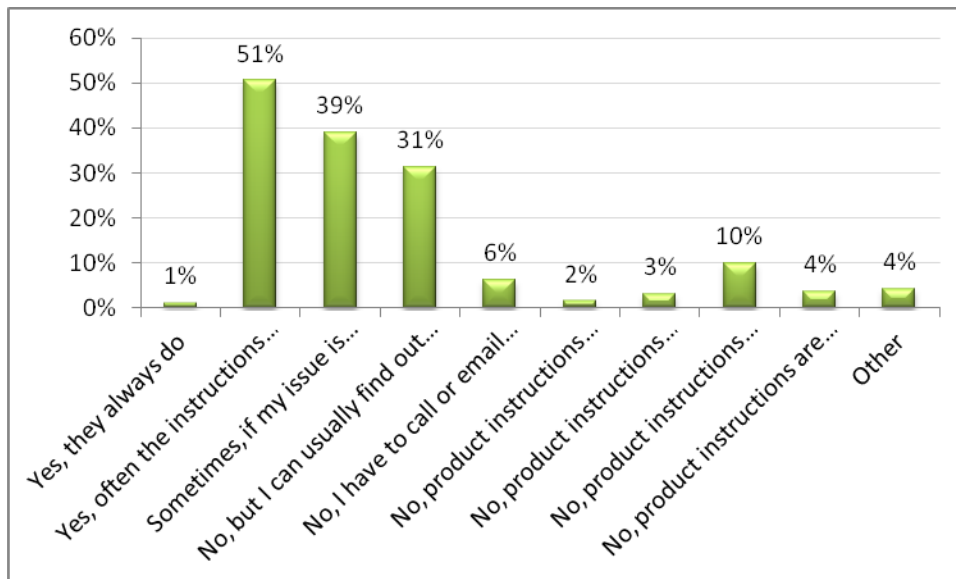
65% said that sometimes product instructions make sense.

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

Question 6

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

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



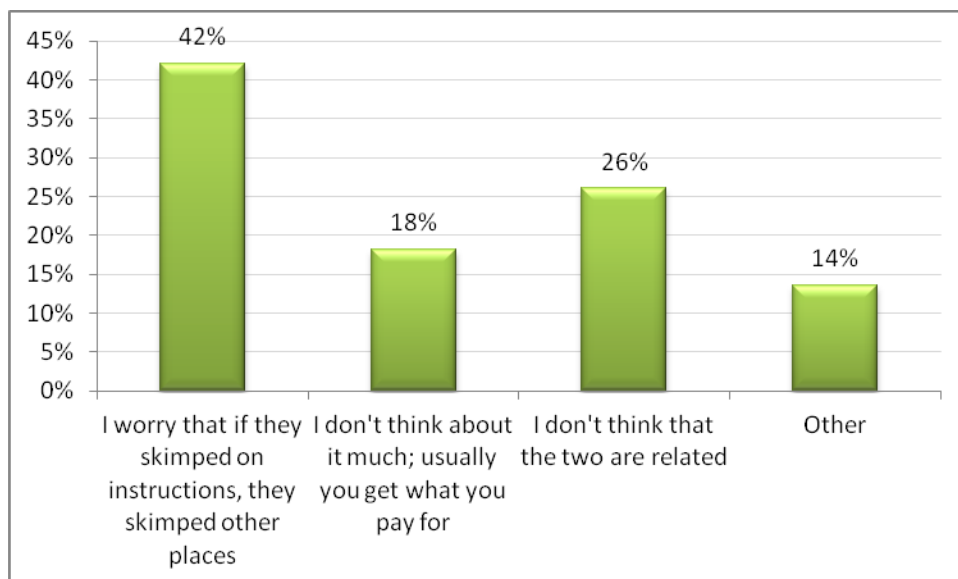
51% report that the instructions "Often" make sense.

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



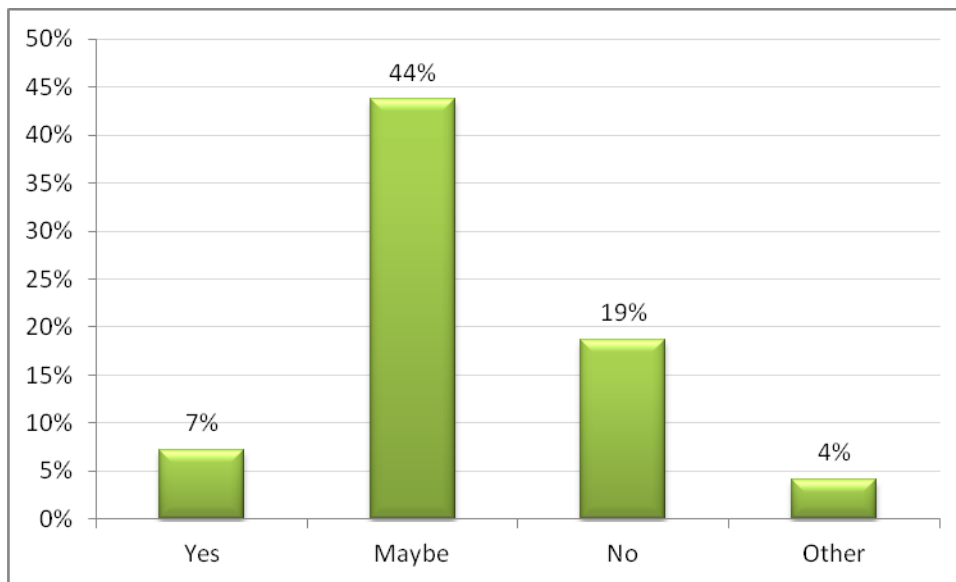
42% said they are concerned about the overall quality of the product, if the instructions are confusing or incomplete.

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

Question 8

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

Option	Response
Yes	7%
Maybe	44%
No	19%
Other	4%
No Responses	26%



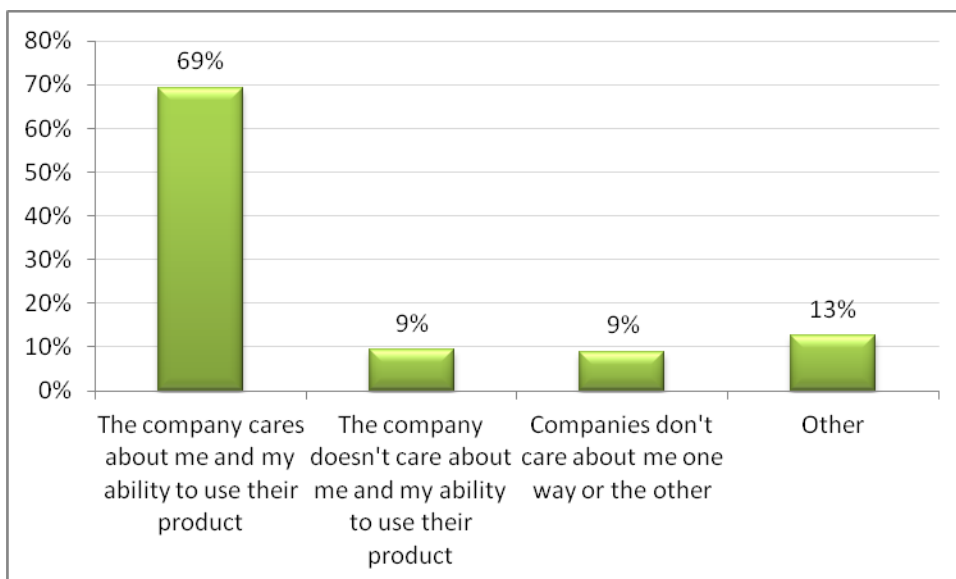
If the product instructions are incomplete, 44% feel less than confident about using the product in general.

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



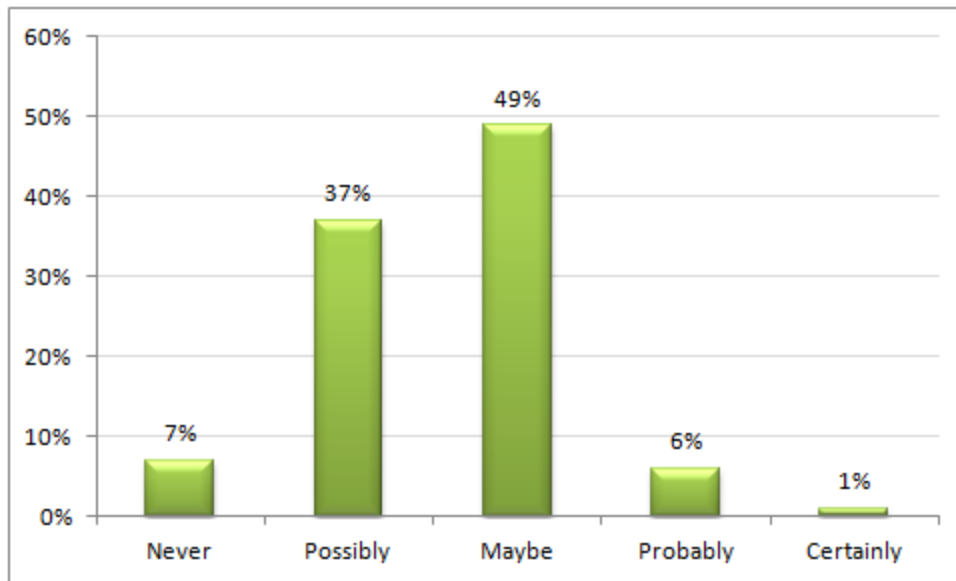
69% feel that poor instructions mean the company that produced the instructions doesn't care about the consumer.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at [Amazon.com](https://www.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
7%	37%	49%	6%	1%



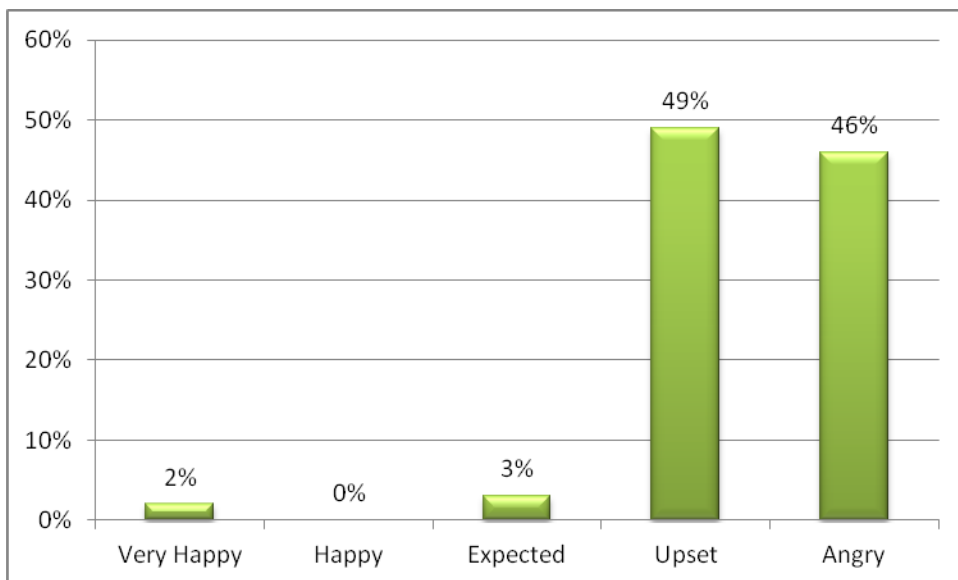
49% say that maybe they would purchase from that company again.

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

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
2%	0%	3%	49%	46%



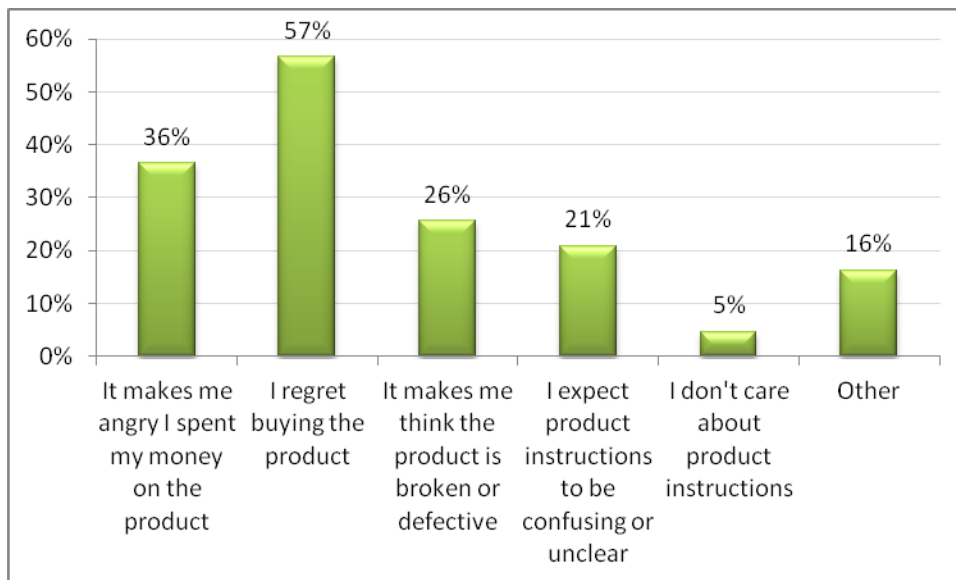
Not being able to understand how to use a product makes 49% of the respondents upset, followed closely by actual anger (46%), giving us 95% of respondents as generally upset and angry. I think the 2% who responded as "Very Happy" were being sarcastic.

To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at [Amazon.com](https://www.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	Response
It makes me angry I spent my money on the product	36%
I regret buying the product	57%
It makes me think the product is broken or defective	26%
I expect product instructions to be confusing or unclear	21%
I don't care about product instructions	5%
Other	16%



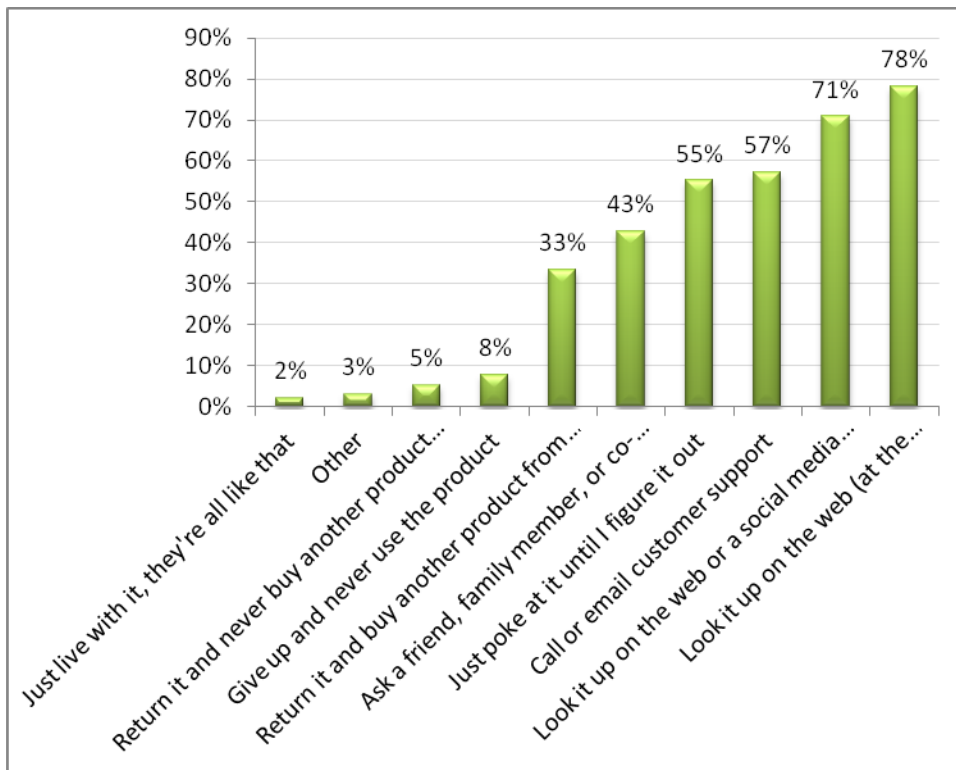
If the product instructions are confusing or incomplete, 57% of the respondents regret purchasing the product and 36% get angry.

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



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

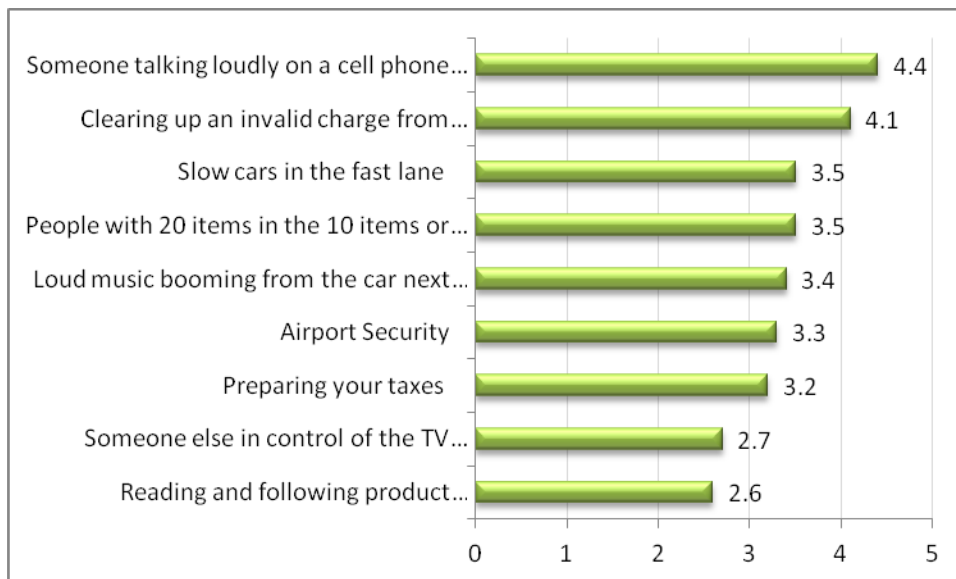
To see the discussion and comments from the respondents, purchase the eBook at Amazon.com.

Question 14

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



Of these activities, 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.

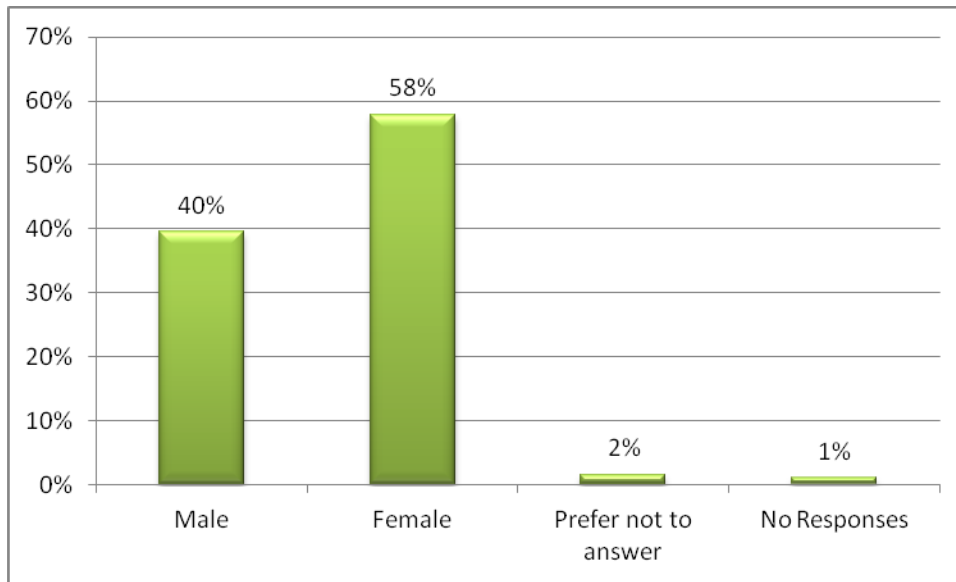
Question 15

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 16

What is your gender (optional)

Option	Response
Male	40%
Female	58%
Prefer not to answer	2%
No Responses	1%

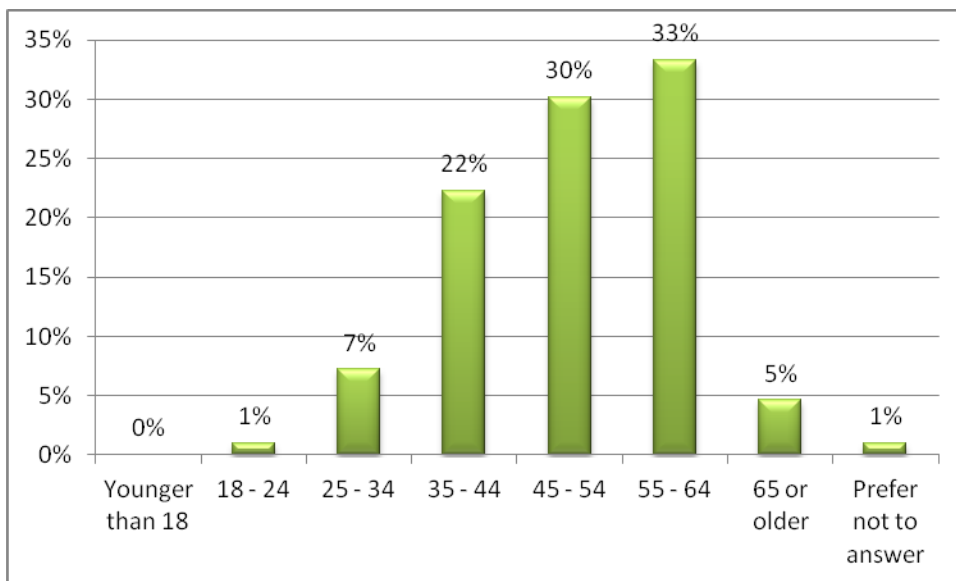


More women than men identified themselves.

Question 17

Which category describes your age? (optional)

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

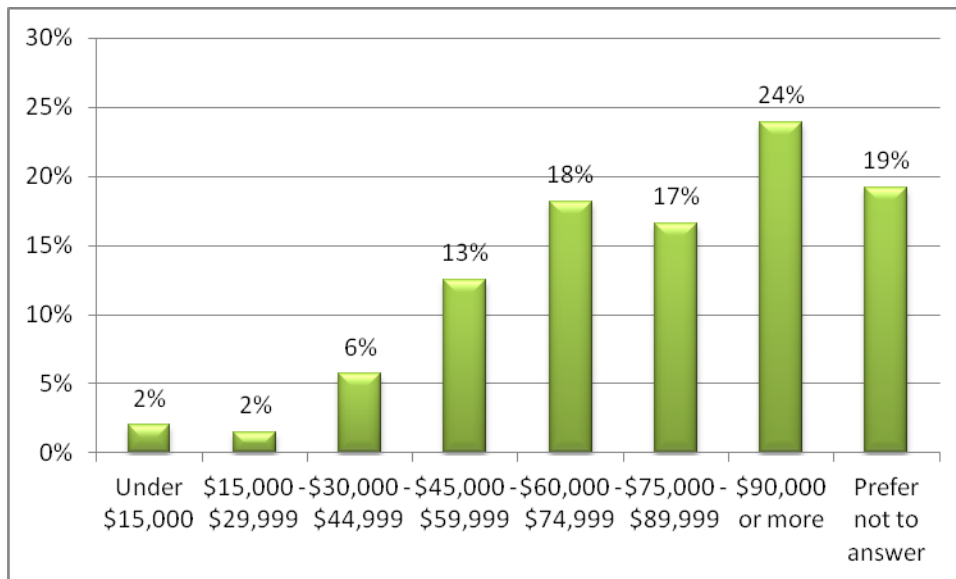


The age demographics skew towards slightly older. This poll may not represent the opinions of the under 34 age groups.

Question 18

Which category best describes your annual income? (optional)

Option	Response
Under \$15,000	2%
\$15,000 - \$29,999	2%
\$30,000 - \$44,999	6%
\$45,000 - \$59,999	13%
\$60,000 - \$74,999	18%
\$75,000 - \$89,999	17%
\$90,000 or more	24%
Prefer not to answer	19%



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 to discover if people use the instructions that come with the product they purchase and if so, are the instructions meeting their needs.

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 (33%) and when they encounter a problem (41%). 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" (65%). The comments are especially interesting for this question and include the following:

- *Typically, their biggest flaw is poor structure and poor access. Instructions are feature-centric instead of user-centric. This approach makes it very hard to find what you need.*
- *Assembly instructions are usually OK (pictures help); but procedural instructions leave a lot to be desired.*
- *Usually with setup they are OK, but beyond that, they are often shaky*
- *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 (42%)
- don't feel confident using the product (62% maybe or no)
- regret purchasing the product (57%)
- are upset or angry about the purchase (4.4 out of 5)
- don't want to purchase from that company again (2.6 out of 5).

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 (57%), this costs the company money. Worse, if the consumer decides the product is too difficult to use, they return it (33%), adding return costs to the company.

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 (69%). 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 consider good instructions a benchmark of good customer relations. They say: "We want you to put our product to good use, and here's how you do it."

Future Research

I didn't ask about if and how people use social media when using products. I think that people reach out to their social media circles for some help but it would be good to know how and when.

Additionally, it would be very good to know if and what consumers communicate to their social media when they find a product unusable. Do they share this? How many people, on average, are exposed to this information? Does this influence purchases? Do they also share if the instructions are clear and useful?

I plan on future polls to start exploring these questions and more.