



From the Outside In: How to Become Part of the Internal Team

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ABSTRACT

As a writer for Monterey Technologies, Inc. (MTI), my role in the Consumer Information Design (CID) group at the Indianapolis-based Thomson Consumer Electronics facility functions differently than that of the in-house documentation specialist. After a brief history of my and my company's relationship with Thomson, this paper presents methods I employ to establish myself as part of the internal documentation team.

Keywords

Documentation, contractor, relationship, barriers, inside, Thomson Consumer Electronics, Monterey Technologies.

1. BACKGROUND

MTI began work for Thomson by providing them with human factors and ergonomics-related support services. Five years of this type of work helped establish a positive working relationship between the two companies. When this relationship grew to encompass technical writing projects,

I took full advantage of the pre-established channels of communication to help me learn how I could best work with their in-house documentation team as well as managers, engineers, and developers.

At first I relied on a senior documentation specialist in the Thomson CID group for help with decisions, questions, concerns, and contact with engineers and managers. Yet as my role within the CID group became more independent, I became responsible for contacting Thomson engineers, designers, and managers directly and making most decisions on my own. I knew I needed to find a way "inside" the company and the easiest route to the information needed to write television and satellite system user guides.

However, at the same time I knew it was important to be on the inside, I also knew that it would be helpful to make clear my position as a contractor. I decided to try and keep my own company's identity while blending in with the Thomson culture. For example, I feel that it is important to bring up issues that, as an MTI employee, I may see differently because I come from a different, outside perspective and have access to different resources than Thomson employees do. Yet it is also important for me to remember that it works both ways: my "outsider" perspective may not include knowledge of sensitive, political, or even private company issues that their perspective includes.

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So how do I function from another company two states away and establish myself as part of the client company? As a rule of thumb, I always take action from the moment I know there will be involvement on my part. Being proactive and not expecting managers to come to me shows that I am eager to be a part of their team. To be remembered and respected while establishing my role as a contractor with Thomson Consumer Electronics, I employ the following methods: don't be a visitor, network appropriately, stay informed, and work around contractor-prohibiting barriers.

2. METHOD I: DON'T BE A VISITOR

One method I use is to avoid acting like a visitor or an outsider. A visitor is someone who has little knowledge of the company, its culture, and its products. A visitor could also be considered someone transient and non-integral. Thus, one of the first actions I took at Thomson was to get an access badge. With a badge, I can walk in and out of all buildings without an escort. When meetings are scheduled close together, or when I would like to stay after a meeting to discuss issues with someone, a badge prevents someone else from having to wait for me, which disrupts their work time.

There are other ways I keep from being a visitor as well, such as adhering to dress codes—including casual dress when appropriate. This simple method assures first that I don't break any written or unwritten rules. It also assures that no one takes notice of me because of what I am wearing. Even the little things matter to me—if I observe that most women wear dresses rather than slacks, I make sure to wear a dress.

Being aware of days when casual dress is expected is just as important as knowing when to wear a suit. Giving a presentation in a suit to an audience dressed in jeans and tee shirts can be as uncomfortable as presenting to a room full of suits while wearing jeans. Making sure to pack my suitcase with both dress clothes and casual business attire proves beneficial when traveling.

3. METHOD II: NETWORK

One way to appear as a "regular" instead of a visitor is to meet new people and network at social functions. I try to schedule trips at the time of company or department outings or

social functions. For example, if I need to be in town for meetings and I am aware of a picnic or company-sponsored event, I arrange my schedule so there will be time to attend these events too.

Since the setting at social functions is casual, people's interests in others are personal as well as business. They open up and talk about their family, hobbies, and what they like to do in their time away from work. Besides sharing personal interests, they are often inquisitive about my role as a documentation specialist and how I became interested in this field. This gives me the opportunity to explain my responsibilities, my relationship with their company, and why the CID group is important in the development process.

I've found that once I've connected with an employee at Thomson on a social level, I tend to get a better response from them on a business level. For example, they respond to emails and return phone calls promptly. Because I have explained my roles and responsibilities as a vendor, they remember that I am a coworker—my office just happens to be two states down instead of two doors down. Connecting at a personal level also provides topics to discuss other than business during moments appropriate for "small talk."

4. METHOD III: STAY INFORMED

Having successfully networked, it is easy to be kept in email loops and phone discussions. I feel comfortable calling key players directly, and I rarely ask others in the CID group to find information about products for me. By calling high-level managers and engineers directly, they are clear on who is responsible for their product's instruction book. By deciding not to ask anyone in the CID group to find information for me, I am able to receive information first hand instead of being the last link in the trickling down of information. I receive information quickly and accurately. By acting as my own agent in finding information, I am no longer "the invisible writer" engineers often think I am, and they are more likely to pass information to me.

Another way I stay informed is to carefully pick and choose the meetings I attend in person, when possible. Since my time at the Thomson sites is limited, I want to spend time in meetings that will be useful in the development of ideas. I do not want to waste time and money on a trip to Indianapolis to

attend a meeting that I could attend via telephone. The tricky part is evaluating which meetings will be most useful. As a general rule, meetings with presentations, visual aids or spontaneous brainstorming or drawing are better attended in person. On the other hand, product updates or regularly-scheduled meetings involving single question and answer exchanges are easy to follow over the phone. Being selective about the meetings I attend keeps me up-to-date and also helps me avoid unnecessary, time-consuming trips.

To make sure I've been informed correctly and completely during meetings I attended remotely, I often ask to be told of any issues that were discussed afterwards. Maybe there was an issue that slipped by during the call and those in attendance discussed it after I hung up. Or, maybe as the group dispersed from the meeting someone had an idea or volunteered to take action on an unresolved issue. Furthermore, since I am not present for everyday lunchtime discussions or the conversations held while walking down the hall, I remind engineers and managers to fill me in on the small, daily discussions they may have without calling a formal meeting. By making sure I'm aware of these small discussions, I attempt to stay just as informed as in-house employees.

It is also important for me to stay apprised of other projects or developments within the CID group. I try to attend CID group meetings when possible to keep abreast and current with others' involvement in projects and general issues with which they deal on a daily or weekly basis. I become aware of the in-house documentation specialists' concerns and how they handle problems in-house. Attending CID group meetings also allows me to bring up any concerns I have and elicit advice and feedback. This sort of communication is beneficial when I need advice on problems others may have encountered within Thomson. It also gives them a feel for the issues I deal with out-of-house, while subtly reminding them of the similarities between my and their roles within the group and the company.

5. METHOD IV: WORK AROUND BARRIERS

Even practicing the best policies of working outside a client company doesn't come without hardships. As an outsider, I have the challenge of working around barriers such

as company restrictions and privacy concerns. Although my role at Thomson does not involve taking part in confidential meetings that discuss strategic planning and financial projections, I have been a part of meeting where sensitive topics were discussed. In such situations, I am likely to be asked not to carry with me any handouts, and I am permitted to stay if I verbally agree to keep the discussed information confidential. Taking great care to respect privacy issues proves important in establishing a trustful relationship.

There are other situations when I need to access restrictive documents and cannot. When a hard copy document I need contains private information and I cannot view it, I often ask if the document containing can be distributed in another format, with the sensitive information restated, revised, or deleted. If this is not possible, I tell someone in the CID the questions I have and ask them to find the answers for me.

Often, Thomson employees are reluctant to divulge information to me when they are not confident whether or not they are allowed to share it with an outside vendor. Instead of placing Thomson employees in awkward situations and trying to convince them that it would be okay for me to have information, I ask a senior member of the CID group to find out if it is acceptable for me to receive it. In this way, I am careful not to put managers or other information providers in compromising positions.

Similarly, I often need online information that is posted on Thomson's password-protected Intranet. Because I cannot access it from my office or from a computer at Thomson without a password, I ask someone in the CID group for weekly reports summarizing postings that may be useful to me.

6. SUMMARY

As a outside contractor, I often act as an agent of the department rather than my own company. Yet a paradox exists: I want to be identified as being from my company, yet most of the time I don't want to be treated any different than the rest of the group of document specialists at Thomson. For reasons of security and clarity, it is imperative that Thomson employees realize I am a part of MTI, and for reasons of communication and respect, they must also realize I am an approachable member of the in-house team.

To establish such a paradoxical role, informing coworkers of roles and responsibilities is the key. Assertive communication and taking a proactive role in the development process is also the key to establishing yourself on the inside. Making sure that I am not a visitor, that I network

appropriately, that I stay informed, and that I work around established barriers are ways that I ensure to be remembered and respected while establishing my role as a contractor to Thomson Consumer Electronics.