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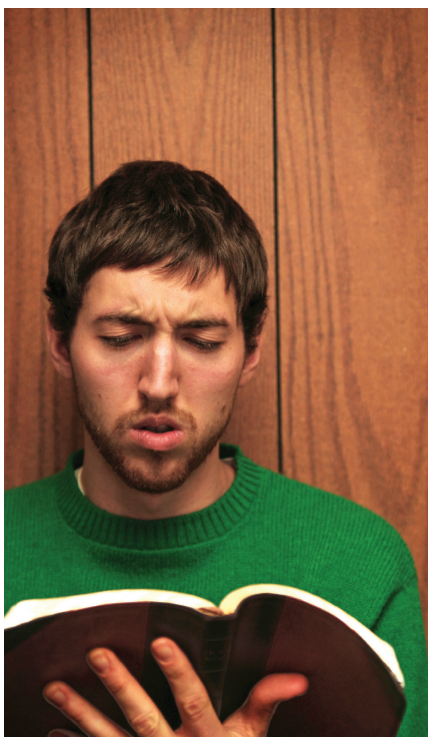
How friendly are building user guides?

Ever been stymied by a user guide? A BRANZ-backed research project is studying building user guides to see how readable and comprehensible they are.



BUILDING USER GUIDES are intended to inform occupants of the building services and features in their workplace - describing and documenting necessary information about the building's operation, maintenance, management and basic trouble-shooting procedures.

They should also give users control over the building they work in, improving productivity, health and comfort.

Guides can be hard to understand

Several studies have found that the level of readability in some user guides exceeds the reading capability of those they are meant for. For building user guides, this could result in poor comprehension of the services and sustainability features and the building not being used to its full potential. Poor comprehension can be due to the complexity of the language and words used.

... and hard to use

Not only has readability been found to be a problem in user guides, usability may also be poor. When the usability of user guides is low, they are not used often or the information is incorrectly interpreted.

Factors contributing to the usability of a user guide include how people relate to the diagrams and the size and type of text used. If the building user guide's information is not clearly understood, users will have a harder time interpreting the controls in a building, which may result in a less than desirable workspace.

Focus on green building guides

The research will evaluate how easily building occupants can read and understand building user guides that have been designed for use in green buildings - where they can contribute to the building sustainability rating. Building user guides from firms and writers around the country will be sampled.

Readability levels will be assessed using the aptly named Simple Measure of Gobbledegook (SMOG) as a basic measure of readability, while a word frequency program will assess the vocabulary necessary to read current building user guides.

The usability features of the user guides, such as the use of images, text layout and the order of ideas, will be assessed by questionnaires, while interviews with users or potential future users will provide additional feedback.

Outcome could improve future guides

Potentially, the study results will provide recommendations for writers of building user guides, identifying the desirable level of readability and the best way to convey the information. The methodology created in the research could be applied to the assessment of other building-related documents.

DETAILS

Michael's research is supported by a BRANZ scholarship. If you wish to be considered for his sample – anonymity is guaranteed – contact him at andersmich3@myvuw.ac.nz.