I began recommending that information-development managers read Crossing the Chasm by Geoff Moore when it first came out in 1991. Even though some of his examples are dated in 1999, the book remains an invaluable addition to a manager’s library. Moore provides insights into high-tech marketing strategies that can assist all of us in better understanding our information and training customers and in developing our own strategies for information transfer. Moore also helps us recognize the struggle our marketing colleagues are going through to position high-tech products effectively. The better we understand why they think the way they do and what they are trying to accomplish, the better we will be able to contribute to the success of the products we support and develop.

Moore, formerly a partner with the marketing consulting firm, Regis McKenna Inc., and now head of his own organization, The Chasm Group, has been a “must read” for the past nine years among marketing and other senior managers of the companies we work for. His role has been to demonstrate the importance of recognizing the flaws in the traditional approach to marketing high-tech products. Most companies expect, Moore explains, to move smoothly through what is known as the Technology Adoption Life Cycle. This Life Cycle envisions the high-tech market as a bell curve (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION LIFE CYCLE**

In this model, new technologies are introduced to anxious Innovators and Early Adopters. After they are on board, companies attempt to use their recommendations to make the transition to the more hesitant, pragmatic, and conservative members of the Early and Late Majorities. The customers in these majority groups that the greatest revenues and profits are to be realized, especially as the technologies mature and the effort expanded on the initial development efforts begins to pay off.

Unfortunately, as Moore demonstrates, it is never that easy. Many technology startups fail to get past the Early Adopters. He labels the transition from visionaries among the Early Adopters to the pragmatists of the Early Majority, “crossing the chasm.” Too often, companies with great products and exciting new technologies descend into this chasm, never to re-emerge. The limited market among Early Adopters is quickly exhausted, making new revenue scarce at the same time that the companies are expending considerable resources to improve the product, add functionality, and increase sales efforts to attract the Early Majority.

To overcome the resistance of the Early Majority to new technology, Moore recommends that companies find a special niche in the market and pursue it singlemindedly. To succeed, the company needs to present these potential customers with value that meets their special needs. To meet special needs, Moore advocates the development of a “whole product” message. We can use Moore’s perspective in Crossing the Chasm to look at the potential information needs of customers. In fact, with this understanding we may even be able to contribute to the difficult job of crossing the chasm.

Innovators are the classic techies who will try a new technology just because it is there. They have great, almost unanswerable, demands for information about the new technology. They do not need task-oriented information because they are likely to try to use the technology in new and innovative ways and they are more than likely to learn through experimentation rather than through following standard procedures. They have enough experience with new technologies that they can often intuit how to make the technology work for them with only the interface and some notes from the developers.

It is important to note that Innovators are more like developers than they are like mainstream customers, which is why developers are so comfortable with them. Because developers understand how Innovators are motivated, they know a great deal about the kinds of information that will be both useful and exciting. As Moore explains, the technology enthusiasts will
“forgive ghastly documentation, horrendously slow performance, ludicrous omissions in functionality ... all in the name of moving technology forward.”

Early Adopters are less technically focused than the Innovators but they are patient with new technologies, willing to spend considerable effort understanding how to apply them to the complex business challenges. These visionaries need good information to support their goals but they are willing to spend time in learning, even if the information is not complete. Both the Innovators and the Early Adopters are willing to give your technology the benefit of the doubt; they want you to succeed.

Not so the mainstream markets. The Early Majority are pragmatists; they want good service, and they want good information and training. Members of the Late Majority, who represent one-third of the potential market, are even more skeptical. They are believers in keeping things the way they have always been, not innovating. They find themselves trapped into using new technologies. They resent products that are difficult to use, and they hate it when they can’t find the answers in the documentation. They especially don’t want to call customer service because they consider most of the people on the other end of the line to be arrogant and ignorant about their needs. Members of the Late Majority want, even demand, all the job aids, wizards, and performance support aids that they can get to make their jobs easier.

Geoffrey Moore is not first to introduce the concept of the Whole Product. He is able to use the Whole Product concept to reinforce his argument about the importance of adopting a new perspective on the product in order to cross the chasm. Moore points out that there is often a gap between the promise that marketing has made to the customer and what the actual product is able to do. If this gap is to be closed, the generic product must be enhanced by services and other products “to become the whole product.” The whole product, Moore illustrates, must include effective documentation, training, and support. The services included with the whole product must enable the pragmatist and conservative customers to gain full value from the product by putting it to use completely in their organizations and realizing productivity and quality gains.

Information-development managers are all too familiar with the problems of getting their companies to understand the need for the whole product. Developers prefer listening to the innovators and early adopters, making functionality ever more complex and ignoring usability. Documentation and training often, under these conditions, emphasize what developers believe to be most important. Marketing is often paying close attention to the early adopters, who have lots of visionary ideas about what the product ought to be. They are not especially interested in building the whole product.

What marketing should do, according to Moore, is focus on the chasm and the problem of convincing the Early Majority that the product is safe, effective, and usable. At this point, a strategy-minded information manager should be participating in the dialog, even leading it. Information, training, and support hold the keys to success. If the information manager is not aware of the potential, it is highly likely that the documentation, training, and support will continue to be focused incorrectly on the early market. There will also be enormous pressure to reduce costs, especially by cutting documentation, because usually the product is not generating sufficient revenues to satisfy the venture capitalists or the stock market analysts.

Information-development managers must, however, be careful not to fall into their own information chasm. Communication and training professionals become quite adept at following the lead of the product developers and creating documentation that explains how the product works. However, the pragmatists and conservatives of the new mainstream market care a lot less about how the product works and much more about how they can gain by using it in their workplace. To meet the information needs of the mainstream market, information-development managers must insist upon going to work for the customer. That means visiting the customers’ workplace, learning about their productivity issues, understanding their goals, and learning how they make use of information and training. From this information base, information-development managers can focus their teams on building value in information, training, and support.