

Putting BASIS Documentation Online

By Paul Hughes

Online documentation meant we could get information to our customers faster, make it easier to use and distribute it for FREE. But it didn't happen overnight, and it brought a new set of challenges.

At TechCon99, I had the pleasure of spending time with some BASIS customers from Latin America. Throughout our conversations, they patiently endured my rudimentary Spanish with the same grace that my Mexican-born mother- and father-in-law do. Having spent some time working in Spain and Mexico, I can fully appreciate the challenges people face in understanding technical information presented in a foreign language.

Poorly constructed documentation might as well be written in a foreign language. Technical documentation specialists must ensure that the information customers receive is accurate, concise, organized, timely, comprehensive and distributed in formats that provide the greatest value. Two years ago, BASIS began a plan to convert to online documentation as part of an overall documentation improvement strategy. Don Andersen and myself, BASIS' technical documentation team, feel very fortunate to have the full support of our engineering, sales and marketing people in this effort.

Online documentation has some impressive advantages for our customers.

- It can be updated much more quickly. We can often incorporate the latest information, submit it for review and distribute it to customers all within a single day. You never have to deal again with obsolete, outdated manuals.
- We can distribute it easily and cheaply on the Internet and on CD. The Internet and CD-ROM mean we can distribute information to you free! And for BASIS customers outside of the United States, this can also mean a great reduction in holdups in customs.
- It allows us to incorporate many interactive elements such as hypertext, hot-spot graphics and full-text search.

When we first began the online documentation effort, the DDBuilder® help system was already being developed in Windows Help. After some investigation, we decided to stick with Windows Help as the development platform. We chose the RoboHELP help authoring tool for several reasons. Perhaps the most important was that it is capable of producing products that run under both Windows and UNIX. It can convert the Windows Help system to HTML Help and Adobe Acrobat-printable PDF formats, both of which can be accessed by developers working on UNIX platforms as well as Microsoft Windows. This multiple platform support is critical for BASIS customers. It also uses Microsoft Word as an editor and is the industry standard for Windows Help system development. And lastly, it enables a single set of source files to be used in more than one set of documentation. For example, the source files used to create the Windows Help system shipped with DDBuilder are also used to build the DDBuilder documentation in the PRO/5® and Visual PRO/5® documentation set. This means we don't have to maintain separate versions of the same information.

The biggest challenge of our online documentation effort has been balancing the capabilities and limitations of the available tools with the needs of our customers. For example, because our customers work on both Windows and UNIX platforms, we need to produce

documentation that can be read on both. The Windows Help file created by RoboHELP contains all the documentation in two files but does not run under UNIX. RoboHELP can convert the Windows Help to an HTML Help system that works for UNIX and Windows customers, but after conversion, the documentation comprises well over 2,000 files. It has some difficulty displaying complex tables and until very recently did not have a full-text search capability. And although these versions can be printed in hard copy, generating acceptable tables of content and index sections requires a lot of manual editing. Despite its problems, though, RoboHELP is currently the best solution for producing online and hard copy documentation for multiple platforms.

Now BASIS distributes online documentation in Windows Help and HTML Help formats, but we will soon be releasing documentation in Adobe Acrobat PDF files. The great thing about the PDF format is that it will allow us to display and to print documentation without having to manually edit around the table- and index-generating problems with RoboHELP. And, with the free Adobe Acrobat Reader, our customers will be able to print their own hard copies without having these kinds of format problems themselves.

Online documentation, however, is only part of the BASIS documentation solution. We are improving the layout, organization and accessibility of our material. For example, program mnemonic, GUI control and event, and !ERROR information could be found throughout the User's Reference Guide. Now, these three subject areas are separate manuals so you can easily go straight to the information you need about each without having to search the entire guide. We're putting a lot of information in easy-to-understand tables and are improving the readability. We're doing everything we can to ensure that our manuals are as easy to use as possible and don't read like a foreign language.

Basics of BBX: Read All About It...



In addition to the technical writers at BASIS International Ltd., others are working on documentation for BBx® users. Jeff Steffanina, owner of Computer Business Consultants Inc., a firm specializing in BBx application solutions and training, has undertaken one such project.

Jeff is in the process of finishing a set of two tutorials. The first tutorial, due out in early Quarter 1 of 2000, will focus on the fundamentals of BBx. Elements of BBx, as Jeff plans to title the tutorial, is geared to programmers new to Business Basic, specifically the BBx version. In the tutorial, Jeff says, he outlines how to write a program using BBx and what a beginning BBx programmer needs to know about the file system, basic commands, utilities and other basics. The second tutorial, which Jeff plans to release late in the same quarter, will focus on programming with Visual PRO/5® tools, GUIBuilder™ and ResBuilder™. This guide will be geared to experienced BBx programmers who have not yet attempted any type of GUI migration using BASIS GUI tools.

Jeff says each of the tutorials will be about 100 pages. To get on the list to purchase either or both tutorials, contact Jeff by e-mail at: jsteff@advcbci.com