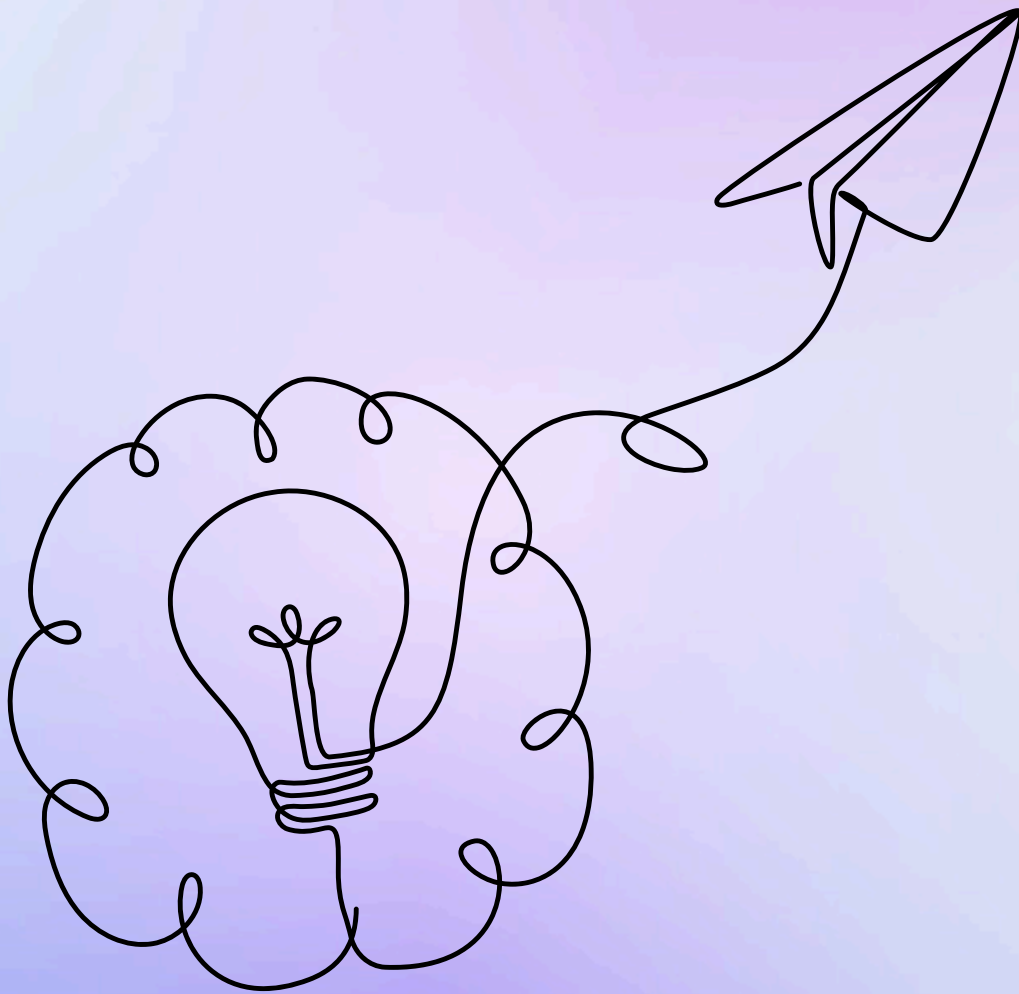


The Hidden Cost of Bad Manuals

Why field guidance fails -
and where the cost shows up instead



Most organizations already have manuals.

What they often lack is completion in the field.

Why some manuals fail in the field

In field-use environments, the question is not whether information exists, but whether people can actually use it.

Most manuals are still delivered in physical form - as printed booklets, inserts, labels, quick-start sheets, or agent materials. The problem is not print itself. The problem is that print alone is often hard to retrieve, hard to complete, and impossible to measure once the user reaches the moment of need.

When guidance depends on stable bandwidth, confident reading, long attention spans, or perfect timing, failure becomes more likely. And when guidance fails, the cost reappears elsewhere - in support, rework, misuse, and weak activation.

In low-income economies, mobile data remains costly, and reading-dependent guidance cannot be assumed to work equally well for everyone. That makes lighter, clearer, and easier-to-retrieve guidance formats more effective at the moment of need.

Format choice is therefore an operational decision, not just a design choice.

Bad manuals do not disappear.

They reappear as operational cost.

When guidance fails, the cost rarely appears under “documentation.”

It usually surfaces somewhere else in the operating model.

- **Support burden** - More avoidable questions, complaint volume, and repetitive explanations for support and service teams.
- **Repeat visits and rework** - More technician revisits, retraining, installation correction, and service follow-up.
- **Misuse and unresolved issues** - More user errors, poor maintenance, safety risk, and unresolved product challenges.
- **Weak activation and churn** - Slower onboarding, dormant accounts, repayment misunderstanding, and lower retention.
- **Fraud and compliance exposure** - In agent-led environments, poor guidance can increase KYC mistakes, fraud vulnerability, and complaint handling pressure.

A bad manual is rarely just a bad document.

It is often a hidden source of operating friction.

The evidence is stronger than many teams assume

Across health, field training, solar, and mobile money, the pattern is consistent: better point-of-use guidance improves comprehension, completion, and operational outcomes.

01 Manuals can be distributed and still fail to create understanding

In a Mozambique survey, **82%** of users said they received a manual, but only half of those said it made the device easier to understand. That implies an overall manual helpfulness rate of only about **41%** of all respondents.

02 Product issues are common, and many remain unresolved

In the same Mozambique survey, 23 of 107 users reported product challenges, and **39%** of those issues were still unresolved at the time of the survey, including some unresolved for more than 30 days.

03 Job aids improve message transfer and user understanding

A peer-reviewed study in Benin found that job-aid-supported counseling improved delivery of recommended messages by about 18 to 26 percentage points and improved user understanding by roughly 24 to 31 points.

04 Offline multilingual training can lower recurring cost

A peer-reviewed Ethiopia study found that an offline multilingual training approach achieved **95%** completion of learning activities, **88%** quiz completion, and **39% lower** recurring training cost than conventional training.

05 Poor guidance also has fraud implications

GSMA's 2024 fraud study estimated average annual losses of about **\$1.06 million** per mobile money provider, with customer complaints acting as a major detection channel.

What better guidance looks like

The strongest evidence does not support a text-heavy, once-and-done approach.

It supports guidance that is visual, localized, replayable, offline-capable or low-bandwidth, measurable, and easy to retrieve at the point of need.

- task-based, not document-based
- designed for replay and retrieval
- localized into the languages people actually use
- available from real touchpoints such as packaging, posters or kiosks
- measured against operational KPIs, not just publication volume

Traditional manual

Dense, hard to retrieve, difficult to update, and weakly measurable.

Field-ready manual

Short, focused, visual or audio-led, low-bandwidth, replayable, measurable, and attached to the moment where people would otherwise fail.

This is the logic behind WOM.fm Visual Audio manuals: audio-first guidance with step-by-step visuals, designed for low-bandwidth environments and deployed from surfaces people already encounter - packaging, inserts, kiosks, agent points, and service materials. The goal is not to create prettier manuals.

The goal is to create manuals that actually complete in the field.

Illustrative scenario

Even conservative modeling suggests the cost of poor guidance can be material.

Because the literature is stronger on rates and frictions than on harmonized cost benchmarks, the safest business case combines observed evidence with conservative scenario modeling.

Illustrative scenario

Using conservative illustrative assumptions, the report models that a portfolio of 100,000 solar or PAYGO customers with an issue rate of 21% to 33% and a guidance-addressable share of 15% to 30% could face roughly 3,200 to 9,900 potentially avoidable issues per year.

If each avoided issue saves one remote support handling event and some would otherwise have required a field revisit, the report estimates direct annual savings of roughly \$20,000 to \$165,000 before indirect effects such as churn, improved repayment, avoided replacements, or brand protection.

The report explicitly labels this as illustrative and assumption-heavy, but directionally credible.

This is not a benchmark. It is a practical scenario model to help operators think about the cost of avoidable issues in their own portfolio. The key point is not the exact number. The key point is that the cost of poor guidance is usually real, recurring, and measurable.

Do not redesign everything.

Start with one manual that fails often.

The fastest wins usually come from the least glamorous workflows: setup, maintenance, troubleshooting, payment explanation, KYC, safe use, and other high-friction moments that generate repeat support, confusion, or risk.

A practical starting point is simple:

- choose one high-friction procedure
- start with one language
- convert it into a field-ready manual
- deploy it on one or two real touchpoints
- define one hard ROI metric before launch

That metric could be support contacts avoided, repeat visits reduced, issue resolution improved, 30-day activation uplift, or recurring training cost reduced.

WOM.fm helps teams turn existing manuals into field-ready Visual Audio modules that can be deployed from packaging, manuals, agent points, posters, and service surfaces - with lightweight reporting built in.


You do not need to redesign your entire documentation system. You need to start with the manual that fails most often - and measure what changes when it finally works.

About this brief

This brief draws on peer-reviewed studies, official sector reporting, and primary operational data focused on low-bandwidth, low-literacy, last-mile environments, with emphasis on solar, PAYGO, telco, and field-use settings.

WOM.fm enables lightweight, measurable guidance formats triggered from physical surfaces - including Visual Audio manuals designed for low-bandwidth field use.

Start with one high-friction manual. Book a call to identify where better guidance could reduce support load, repeat visits, or activation friction.

 www.wom.fm/call

 marcel@wom.fm

 wom.fm