Consumer expectations for owner’s manuals—
safety information & online availability

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Overview
Consumer products are often provided with a system of information that includes manuals or similar documents. Increasingly, such manuals are available digitally, either in addition to or instead of in print. An online survey was conducted to assess expectations and preferences regarding manuals for a variety of products that might be purchased for consumer use.

A large majority of participants:
• expected the products to have manuals, other than for a few simple products.
• expected to find safety information in product manuals.
• expected that a product manual would be available online.

Most participants reported that they would be able to access an online manual via a QR or URL. Over half of participants reported a preference for reading a paper rather than online version of a manual. Most participants reported having consulted a video for product assembly or repair.

Method
Each participant was asked questions about random subset of 16 (of 35) products and three products that were presented to everyone, along with additional questions about accessing online information.

Participants (2022)
1235 recruited from Qualtrics online panel.
• Age: Mean 31.25 years, varied within 1.0%.
• Gender: Male, female, varied within 0.5%
• Income: Low, middle, high varied within 1.0%
• Education: < High school (3%), High school (31%), Some college (26%), Associates degree (13%), Bachelor’s degree (26%), Post-graduate degree (7%)

Participants also reported some problems finding and using online manuals. Some representative comments:
• “didn’t know exact model number of the product to do the search.”
• “Poor manufacturers website”
• “didn’t know where to find the manual”
• “Didn’t know the number of people to contact”

Questions assessed:
• Expectations of:
  • whether there would be a manual for the product;
  • whether the manual would include safety information;
  • whether the manual would be available online;
  • Preferences for printed versus online manuals.
  • Perceived ability to access an online manual via QR or URL.

Online/paper preferences
Over half of participants reported a preference for reading a paper rather than an online version of a manual. More respondents preferred to refer back to an online manual than preferred an online manual when purchasing a product.

Summary
In February 2024, participants asked more generally about how to find a product manual online for any of the following reasons? (Check all that apply)

Most participants (91%) reported that they would be able to access an online version of a product manual using a QR code or URL, though some might need help. Some participants reporting being able to use only one of the two—about 9% URL only, about 2% QR only.

In a separate 2023 online study, we asked 264 general population SurveyMonkey Audience participants if they had ever used a QR code—85% reported yes, 11% no, 4% unsure. See also Isaacson, Hall, & Frantz (2019) for more on the use of QRs and URLs to access safety information—request at booth.)

February 2024 – Late breaking news
Data collected in early February, 2024 addressed additional areas of participant use of online product information as well as some frustrations encountered. A few highlights are below, to request additional information when available, email isaacson@appliedsafety.com

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