

# O'Neil & Associates doing business the write way

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## *Publisher specializes in repair manuals*

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By Jim BOHMAN  
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**DAYTON** - When a technician stops by to fix your range or refrigerator, it's quite possible a Dayton company wrote the instructions he uses.

"We write manuals for everything from jet engines to home appliances," says John E. Staten, president and owner of O'Neil & Associates, 425 N. Findlay St.

Technical publishing has been O'Neil & Associates' core business since it was founded by an aviation engineer, the late Larry E. O'Neil, in 1947. Today, the company is a worldwide business with annual sales of more than \$15 million and 200 employees in Dayton and eight satellite offices around the U.S. and in Europe.

Major customers include Delphi Automotive Systems, General Electric and the Cummins Engine Co.

"We wrote manuals for Delphi for the (windshield) wiper systems for GM cars," Staten said.

A building behind the O'Neil headquarters houses an assortment of product prototypes including electric range cooking surfaces, refrigerators and new style washing machines from General Electric's appliance division in Louisville and a muscular diesel engine from Cummins in Columbus, Ind.

O'Neil engineers and technical writers take apart the products. Then, with blueprints and engineering instructions in hand, they write step-by-step procedures in plain language for servicing the devices.

Although the company produces some operating manuals for consumers, most are read by professional technicians and mechanics. The military services also are O'Neil customers.

People have trouble programming their VCRs and other digital appliances because the instructions are poorly written, Staten said. "If there were good instructions, everybody's VCR and car clock would be right. Our job is to provide accurate and easy to understand information."

"Engineers have trouble communicating to ordinary people because they assume everyone understands their jargon," Staten said. "The best technical writing is not technical at all. It's everyday language. You put yourself in the other person's shoes."

**JOHN STATEN, owner and president of O'Neil & Associates, Inc., is surrounded by car engines and home appliances. The company produces repair manuals for products ranging from home appliances to car and jet engines. "The best technical writing is not technical at all. It's everyday language. You put yourself in the other person's shoes," he said.**



In the last 50 years, O'Neil staffers have written manuals on "trains, planes and automobiles," Staten said. They have authored repair instructions for vacuum cleaners, satellite ground terminals, forklift trucks, fire trucks, automated warehouses, U.S. Navy ship engines, and an entire Navy boat that required 10,000 pages.

About half of O'Neil's work is for aerospace manufacturers. Mr. O'Neil was one of the five founders of the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton.

The founder, an engineer for Douglas Aircraft, came to Dayton during World War II to work on airplane development. After the war, he started his own engineering shop.

A big part of his business was helping companies streamline production to make products easier to manufacture. That led O'Neil into product design and writing operating manuals. Before long, he won acclaim for writing instruction booklets that were easy to understand, Staten said.

O'Neil's successor as president was the late Wayne M. Yoder who ran the company from 1977 to 1988.

Staten, a graduate of Dayton's Patterson Co-Operative High School, joined the company as an illustrator in 1966 and was mentored by O'Neil and Yoder.

Staten became head of the technical writing department in 1972, and five years later became operations manager. He was promoted to vice president in 1978 and purchased the company 10 years later.

His staff include Robert J. Heilman, vice president for corporate development; Thomas R. Milligan, vice president and director of marketing; John W. Schomburg, director of administration; Gerald O. Tansky, manager of customer assurance; and Chris R. Flohre, manager of operations.

O'Neil has regional offices, usually near major customers, in Portland, Ore., Oshkosh,

Wis., Columbus, Ind., Cincinnati, Greenville, N.C., Lynn, Mass., Melbourne, Fla., and Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

Staten said revenues were flat this year after doubling over the past five years. In the 1980s, growth was in military work. But in the past decade, expansion came from the industrial and consumer sectors.

The future of technical writing, Staten said, will involve CD-ROM recordings and the Internet for storing, accessing and updating technical data. He said O'Neil & Associates already is using this new technology.

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**O'NEIL & ASSOCIATES, INC.**

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