**Recommendations for help authoring tools and related training**

I’m recommending that we purchase MadCap Flare for our help authoring tool.

Benefits:

* Single-sourcing. It will allow me to maintain help content in one place and create output for two different formats: WebHelp and PDF.
* Future-proof. A quote from a Flare user’s blog: *“Flare uses standards-based project source files. All of the project files are standards-based, non-proprietary formats. Most are XML-based, with a few exceptions (.css style sheets, document header files for context-sensitive help, etc.). However, I know that my content isn’t being held hostage by MadCap. As the years go by, if I need to migrate to a different HAT, I know that my content will be accessible.”*
* Source control. With the exception of SoftwarePassport help, none of my documentation is in source control. Flare works with source control because the Flare source files are text based. (Help and Manual does not have that benefit.) Another quote from the Flare user’s blog: *“Since the files are plain-text, not binary, they also work nicely with source-control software. When I make changes to a file, the source control can track which changes were made, rather than storing a whole new copy of a binary file. My entire project is 16MB, of which 15 MB are images. This makes for much more efficient storage on the source-control system.”*
  + I checked with Bruce, and my current source control software (Tortoise CVS) will work with our system.
* FrameMaker import. Though it will take quite a bit of work to map our FrameMaker styles over to Flare, this product allows importing of entire FrameMaker books. This feature will help me convert the 600 plus pages of the user guide over to Flare.
* Really nice presentation. Going forward, our primary help method will be the contextual online help. Users will click links to topics as they always have, but instead of opening just one topic they will be seeing the chosen topic within an entire WebHelp system, with a table of contents, full-text search, indexing and other advanced features such as saving favorite searches and favorite contents (bookmarking help pages). We also have the option to include a glossary if I can find the time to write one.

Flare’s own online help:<http://www.madcapsoftware.com/support/webhelp/flare/Default.htm>

Digital River globalCommerce site that uses Flare: <http://www.digitalriver.com/helpcentral/production/gc/en_US/ext/help_central.htm>

See also the WebHelp sample that I created with Flare.

**MadCap Flare**

For one seat, we would pay $899, plus $449 for the Bronze Maintenance, which we would need in order to receive product updates. **Total = $1,398**. At the end of the first year and each year thereafter, we would pay **$449** (or the current price) to keep going with the Bronze Maintenance.

If we purchase three licenses, they will discount each license by $200. For seven or more licenses they will take $400 off of each license.

**Flare Training**

The makers of Flare offer two levels of training. The first level would be a good way for me to quickly get up to speed on creating help with the product.

**Onsite and Web-based Training**

**Basic/Intermediate Course**

During a hands on, three-day, onsite or web-based training course, a Certified Flare Instructor will cover basic and intermediate skills, including:

* Creating a new project
* Importing content (including existing RoboHelp projects)
* Creating and editing topics
* Working with images and video
* Creating navigation, including links, Table of Contents, and Index
* Managing styles, skins, and other appearance features
* Efficient single-sourcing, including variables and conditional tags
* Publishing content to web and print

Cost of the web-based course for three days: **$1,299; next course is second week of June**

**Books**

Single Sourcing: Building Modular Documentation (Paperback) by Kurt Ament. **$36.90** with free shipping from Amazon.

CSS: The Definitive Guide, Third Edition by Eric A. Meyer. **$44.99 plus shipping** from O’Reilly Media.

*Note: If we happen to have a recent CSS book around here that no one’s using, I could use that instead of this one.*